Jacqueline Harpman

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

"What is remarkable is that a book setting out to give a minute account of a nightmare and to probe the depths of the human psyche should contrive to excite such a powerful emotional charge"

HECTOR BIANCIOTTI, *Le Monde*

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

JACQUELINE HARPMAN was born in Etterbeek, Belgium, in 1929. Being half Jewish, the family moved to Casablanca when the Nazis invaded, and returned home after the war. After studying French literature she started training to be a doctor, but could not complete her medical studies when she contracted tuberculosis. She turned to writing in 1954 and her first work was published in 1958. In 1980 she qualified as a psychoanalyst. She had given up writing after her fourth book was published, and resumed her career as a novelist only some twenty years later. She has now written some dozen novels and won several literary prizes. She is married to an architect and has two children.

Although her work has been translated into other languages, *The Mistress of Silence* is her first novel translated into English.

ROS SCHWARTZ, who has translated fiction by such authors as Ousmane Sembene, Andrée Chedid and Sébastien Japrisot as well as many works of non-fiction, has been a full-time translator since 1982. She ran translation workshops at Goldsmith's College, London University, and teaches on the part-time MA course in translation studies at Middlesex University. She has been chairwoman of the British Translators' Association.

Jacqueline Harpman

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

Translated from the French
by Ros Schwartz

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To Denise Geilfus
in friendship

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

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SINCE I BARELY venture outside these days, I spend a lot of time in one of the armchairs, rereading the books. I only recently started taking an interest in the prefaces. The authors talk readily about themselves, explaining their reasons for writing the book. This surprises me: surely it was more usual in that world than in the one in which I have lived for people to pass on the knowledge they had acquired? They often seem to feel the need to emphasise that they wrote the book not out of vanity, but because someone asked them to, and that they had thought about it long and hard before accepting. How strange! It suggests that people were not avid to learn, and that you had to apologise for wanting to convey your knowledge. Or, they explain why they felt it was appropriate to publish a new translation of Proust, because previous efforts, laudable though they may be, lacked something or other. But why translate when it must have been so easy to learn different languages and read anything you wanted directly? These things leave me utterly baffled. True, I am extremely ignorant: apparently, I know even less of these matters than I thought I did. They express their gratitude to those who taught them, who opened the door to this or that avenue of knowledge and, as I have

absolutely no idea what they are talking about, I usually read these words with a degree of indifference. But yesterday, suddenly, my eyes filled with tears; I thought of Anthea, and was overcome by a tremendous wave of grief. I could picture her, sitting on the edge of a mattress, her knees to one side, sewing patiently with her makeshift thread of plaited hairs which kept snapping, stopping to look at me, astonished, quick to recognise my ignorance and teach me what she knew, apologising that it was so little, and I felt a huge wrench, and began to sob. I had never cried before. My heart was gripped by a pain as powerful as the pain of the cancer in my belly, and I who no longer speak because there is nobody to hear me, began to call her. Anthea! Anthea! I shouted. I could not forgive her for not being there, for having allowed death to snatch her, to tear her from my clumsy arms. I reproached myself for not having held on to her, for having understood that she could not go on any more, I told myself that I had abandoned her because I was frigid, as I had been all my life, as I shall be when I die, and that I could not hug her warmly, that my heart was frozen, unfeeling and that I had not realised that I was desperate.

Never before had I been so devastated. I would have sworn it could not happen to me; I had seen women trembling, crying, and screaming, but I had remained unaffected by their tragedy, a witness of impulses which I found unintelligible, remaining silent even when I did what they asked of me to assist them. True, we were all caught up in the same drama that was so powerful, so all-embracing that I was unaware of anything that was not related to it, but I had come to think that I was different. And now, as I was racked with sobs, I was forced to recognise too late, much

too late, that I too had loved, that I could suffer and that, after all, I was human.

I felt as if this pain would never be appeased, that it had me in its grip for ever, that it would prevent me from devoting myself to anything else, and that I was allowing it to do so. I think that that is what they call being consumed with remorse. I would no longer be able to get up, think, or even cook my food, and I would let myself slowly waste away. I was deriving a sort of morbid pleasure from imagining myself giving in to despair, when the physical pain returned. It was so sudden, and so acute that it distracted me from the mental pain. I found this abrupt swing from one to the other funny, and there I was, I who not surprisingly never laugh, doubled up in agony, and laughing.

When the pain subsided, I wondered whether I had ever laughed before. The women often used to laugh, and I believe I had sometimes joined in, but I was not sure. I realised then that I never thought about the past, I lived in a perpetual present and I was gradually forgetting my story. At first, I shrugged, telling myself that it would be no great loss, since nothing had happened to me, but soon I was shocked by that thought. After all, if I was a human being, my story was as important as that of King Lear, or Prince Hamlet that William Shakespeare had taken the trouble to relate in detail. I made the decision almost without realising it: I would do likewise. Over the years, I had learnt to read fluently; writing is much harder, but I have never been daunted by obstacles. I have paper and pencils, although I may not have much time. Now that I no longer go off on expeditions, no occupation calls me: I decided to start at once. I went into the cold store, took out the meat that I would eat later and left it to defrost: this way, when hunger

struck, my food would soon be ready. Then I sat down at the big table and began to write.

As I write these words, my tale is over. Everything around me is in order and I have fulfilled the last task I set myself. It only took me a month, which has perhaps been the happiest month of my life. I do not understand that: after all, what I was evoking was only that strange existence which has not brought me much joy. Is there a satisfaction in the effort of remembering that provides its own nourishment, and is what one recollects less important than the activity of remembering? That is another question that will remain unanswered: I feel as though I am made of nothing else.

As far back as I can recall, I have been in the bunker. Is that what they mean by memories? On the few occasions when the women were prepared to tell me about their past, their stories were full of events, comings and goings, men: but I am reduced to calling a memory the sense of existing in the same place, with the same people and doing the same things – in other words, eating, excreting and sleeping. For a very long time, the days went by, each just like the day before, then I began to think, and everything changed. Before, nothing happened other than this repetition of identical gestures and time seemed to me to stand still, even if I vaguely realised that I was growing and that time was passing. My memory begins with my anger.

Obviously, I cannot say how old I was. The others had been adult for a long time when I appeared to be on the verge of puberty. But my development stopped there: I started to get hair under my arms and on my pubes, my breasts grew a little, and then everything came to a halt. I never had a period. The women told me I was lucky, that

I would not have the bother of blood and the precautions to be taken so as not to stain the mattresses, I would escape the tedious monthly task of washing out the rags they had to jam between their legs as best they could, by squeezing their thigh muscles as they had nothing to hold them in place, and I would not have to suffer stomach cramps like so many adolescent girls. But I did not believe them: they nearly all menstruated and how can you feel privileged not to have something that everybody else has? I felt they were deceiving me.

At that time, I was not curious about things, and it did not occur to me to ask what was the point of periods. Perhaps I was naturally quiet, in any case, the response my rare questions did receive was not exactly encouraging. More often than not, the women would sigh and look away, with a "what use would it be for you to know if we told you?" which made me feel I was disturbing or upsetting them. I had no idea, and I did not press the matter. It was only much later that Anthea explained to me about periods. She told me that none of the women had much education, they were factory workers, typists or shop assistants, all words which had never meant very much to me, and that they were not much better informed than I was. All the same, when I did find out, I felt that they had not really made an effort to teach me. I was furious. Anthea told me that I was not entirely wrong and tried to explain their reasons: I may come back to this later, if I remember, but at the time I want to write about, I was livid, I felt I was being scorned, as if I were incapable of understanding the answers to the few questions I asked, and I resolved not to take any further interest in the women.

I was bad-tempered all the time, but I was unaware of

it, for I did not know the words for describing moods. The women bustled to and fro, busying themselves with the few day-to-day activities, never asking me to join them. I would squat and watch whatever there was to see. When I think about it: almost nothing. They would be sitting, chatting, or, twice a day, they prepared the meal. Gradually, I turned my attention to the guards who paced up and down continually outside the cage. They were always in threes, a few paces apart, observing us, and it was customary to pretend to ignore their presence, but I grew inquisitive. I noticed that one of them was different: taller, slimmer and, as I realised after a while, younger. That fascinated me. In their lighter moments, the women would talk of men and love, they would giggle and tease me when I asked what was so funny. I went over everything I knew: kisses, which were given on the mouth, embraces, making eyes at someone, playing footsie, which I did not understand at all, then came seventh heaven – my goodness! as I had never seen any sky at all, I had no idea what the first heaven or any of the others in between were, I did not dwell on it – and they would also complain about the brutality, it hurt, men didn't care about women, they got them pregnant and then walked out saying "How do I know it's mine?". Sometimes the women would declare that it was no great loss, and at others they would start to cry. But I was destined to remain a virgin. One day, I screwed up the courage to overcome my anger, and questioned Dorothy, the least daunting of the two elderly women.

"You poor thing!"

And, after a few sighs, she came out with the usual reply:

"What point is there in your knowing, since it can't happen to you?"

"Because I want to know!" I raged, suddenly grasping why I was so adamant.

She could not understand why someone would want knowledge that would be of no use to them and I could not get anything out of her. It was certain that I would die untouched, and I wanted to satisfy my curiosity at least. Why were they all so determined not to say anything? I tried to console myself with the thought that it was no secret anyway, because they all shared it. Was it to give it an additional sparkle that they refused to tell me, to give it the lustre of a rare gem? By remaining silent, they were creating a girl who did not know and who would regard them as the guardians of a treasure. Did they only keep me in ignorance so that they could pretend that they were not entirely powerless? They sometimes claimed that it was out of modesty, but I could see perfectly well that among themselves, they had no modesty, they whispered, tittered, they were lewd. I would never make love, they would never make love again: perhaps that made us equal and they were trying to console themselves by depriving me of the only thing they could.

Often, in the evening, before falling asleep, I would think of the young guard. I drew on the little I had been able to guess: in another life, he would have come and sat beside me, he would have asked me to dance, he would have told me his name, I would have had a name which I would have told him, we would have talked and, if we found each other attractive, we would have walked hand in hand. Maybe I would not have found him interesting: he was the only one of our six jailers who was not old and decrepit, and I was probably indulgent because I had never met any other young men. I tried to imagine

our conversation, in a past that I had not known: will it be fine again tomorrow? Have you seen next-door's kittens? I hear your aunt is going on holiday . . . but I had never seen kittens and I had absolutely no idea what fine weather might be, which put an end to my reverie. Then I would think about kissing, I imagined the guard's mouth as precisely as I could. It was quite wide, with well-defined, thinnish lips – I did not like the full lips that some of the women had. I pictured my lips drawing close to his: there was probably something else I needed to know, because I felt nothing in particular.

Except one evening. Instead of falling asleep from the boredom of trying to imagine a kiss that would never happen, I suddenly remembered that the women had spoken of interrogations, saying that they were surprised that there had never been any. I embellished the little they had said: I imagined them coming to get one of the women, taking her away screaming and terrified. Sometimes, the woman was never seen again, sometimes she would be flung back among us in the morning, covered in burns, injured, moaning, and did not always survive. I thought: "Ah! If there were interrogations, he would come and get me, I would leave the room where I have always lived, he would drag me along unknown corridors, something would happen!"

My mind worked incredibly fast: the boy was propelling me along with seeming dedication to his job, but, once we rounded the corner and were out of sight, he stopped, turned to me, smiled and said: "Don't be afraid," and then took me in his arms. Then an immense sensation surged through me, an eruption so overwhelming, an extraordinary burst of light exploded inside me, I could not

breathe – and then I breathed again for it was desperately brief.

After that, my mood changed. I no longer tried to get the women to tell me their secrets, I had my own. The eruption proved difficult to achieve, I had to tell myself stories that got increasingly longer and more complicated, and, to my utter dismay, I never experienced this explosion twice in a row, whereas I wished it could have lasted for hours. I wanted to feel that sensation all the time, day and night, swaying deliciously, like the rare patches of grass on the plains caressed by the gentle breeze that blew for days at a time, which I did not see until much later.

I now devoted all my time to the task of producing the eruption. I had to invent exceptional circumstances where we found ourselves alone, or at least isolated amidst the others, face to face, and then, after much agony, I had the exquisite surprise of finding his arms around me. My imagination developed. I had to exercise rigorous discipline, as I could not invoke the same story twice, surprise was crucial, as I realised after trying several times to relive the exquisite gesture that had transported me, without feeling the slightest stirring. This was extremely difficult because I was both the inventor of the story, the narrator and the listener awaiting the shock of the unexpected. Today, I am amazed that I managed to overcome so many obstacles! Imagine how fast my imagination had to work to prevent me from knowing what would happen so that I would be taken unawares! The first time, when I dreamed up the interrogation, I had never made up stories before, I did not even know it was possible, I was completely caught up in it, marvelling both at such a new activity and at the story itself. Then I soon became adept at it, a narrative

engineer; I could tell if it had begun badly, if it was heading towards an impasse, and even go back to the beginning to change the course of events. I went so far as to create characters who reappeared regularly, who changed from one story to another, and who became old friends. I was delighted with them, and it is only now, on reading books, that I can see that they were rather limited.

I needed to invent increasingly complicated stories: I think that deep down something inside me knew what I wanted from them and objected; I had to catch myself off guard. I sometimes had to keep it up for several hours, to lull my inner audience into a false sense of security so that she would be entranced by the pleasure of listening, enjoy the story and lower her defences. Then came the magic moment, the boy's gaze, his hand on my shoulder and the rapture that invaded my entire being. Then, I was able to sleep. Perhaps, in stopping the story, I was disappointing an inner listener who preferred the story to the agitation, which is why she always drew it out and would happily have deprived me in order to prolong her own pleasure. Sometimes, in the course of the story, I would try and argue with her: "I'm tired, I want to go to sleep, let me get to the eruption, I'll carry on tomorrow." But it was no use, she would not allow herself to be fooled.

The women noticed that I had changed. They observed me for a moment, saw me always sitting down, my knees tucked under, my chin resting on my folded arms, and I suppose I had a vacant stare. I did not notice because I did not bother about them any more, and I was astonished when Annabel came to question me.

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking," I replied.

That puzzled her. She stayed for a moment longer, waiting for me to say more, then went to convey my reply to the others. They argued for a while, and Annabel returned.

"What about?"

The full force of my anger returned.

"When I asked you what people do when they make love, you wouldn't tell me, and now you expect me to tell you what's going on inside my head! You keep your secrets, if it makes you happy, but don't expect me to tell you mine!"

She frowned and went back to the others. This time, the debate went on longer. I had never seen them talk at such length and with such seriousness, usually they burst out laughing after ten minutes. Apparently I had provoked something new in their minds. Another woman then rose and came towards me. It was Dorothy, the oldest and most respected. Even I did not hate her. She sat down and stared hard at me. Her presence annoyed me greatly because she was interrupting me at a crucial moment in the story which had been going on for a very long time: I was going to be locked up alone in a cell and I had overheard a few words about the relief guard and I had every reason to believe that the night guard was the young man. How could I carry on in front of this old woman who was staring silently at me? At least I could try not to lose sight of the situation: I was alone, panting, frightened, I could hear voices and the clink of weapons in the corridor, I did not know what was going on, I was afraid of this atmosphere of urgency and turmoil. I tried to suspend the scene in my mind while scrutinising Dorothy who was scrutinising me. I told myself that if the eruption did not

happen soon, I would have to make some sense out of the situation, but what on earth could I imagine that would feed back into the static world in which we lived, women locked up for so many years that they had lost all notion of time?

"So, you've got a secret," said Dorothy at long last.

I did not reply, as it was not a real question. I realised that she was trying to perturb me with her heavy stare and her silence. There was a time, before I had found the inner world where I entertained myself, when I was still inquisitive and docile, when I would have been intimidated, I would have wondered what I had done wrong to deserve this scrutiny, and I would have feared the punishment. But I now knew that I was beyond their reach: punishments were never more than being left out, excluded from futile, flighty conversations about nothing at all, and that was all I wanted so that I could continue my secret pursuit in peace.

As I did not react, she frowned.

"I spoke to you. It is only polite to reply."

"I have nothing to say. They told you I've got secrets. You tell me they told you so. Very well. So what?"

"I want to hear them."

I began to laugh, which astonished me as much as anyone else. I had been used to respecting the women's wishes, especially those of the eldest who had the most authority, but everything had changed, for I could no longer see any basis for that authority. I suddenly discovered that they had no power. We were all locked up in the same manner, without knowing why, watched over by jailers who, either out of contempt, or because they were obeying orders, did not speak to any of us. They never

entered the cage. They were always in threes, except when they changed shift and we saw six at once, and they did not speak to each other. At meal-times, one of the big double doors would open, a man would push a trolley along the gap between the cage and the wall, and another unlocked a little hatch, through which he passed us the food. They would not answer our questions and we had long ago stopped asking them any. The old women were as helpless as the younger ones. They had seized some imaginary power, a power over nothing, a tacit agreement which created a meaningless hierarchy, for there were no privileges that they could grant or refuse. The truth is, that we were on an absolutely equal footing.

I remained still for a few seconds, registering these familiar facts that suddenly became stunning revelations, looking Dorothy squarely in the eyes. I remember what she said.

"You want to hear them," I said, "but all you can do about it is inform me of your wishes."

I noted with interest the effect my words had on her: at first, when she saw that I was about to answer, she looked smug, she must have thought she had won my obedience. Then she listened, and caught the meaning of my words, but she was so astonished that she thought she had not understood.

"What do you mean?"

"Just think about it," I said, "I mean exactly what I said."

"You haven't said anything!"

"I said that I wouldn't tell you my secrets. You told me you wanted them. That's not telling me anything new, I knew that already. You think you only have to tell me you want to know and I'll tell you."

That was indeed what she thought.

"That is how things should be," she maintained.

"Why?"

She was disconcerted. I saw that she was not thinking about my question, she was so shocked that such a question could have been asked. She had inherited a tradition to which I did not belong: when an older woman asks a younger woman to reply, the younger one does so. She had never questioned that, but I, who had grown up in the bunker, had no reason to comply. After a few moments:

"What do you mean, why?"

"Why should I answer? Why do you think it goes without saying?"

Her gaze faltered. She tried to think, but she was not used to doing so, she seemed dazed and clutched at the first idea that came to her:

"You are insolent," she said, relieved to find an explanation for the incomprehensible words I had just uttered, certain that it would be enough to return to the habitual ways, to convention, to commonplaces.

"You are a fool," I retorted, intoxicated by my new-found certainties, "and this conversation is absurd. You think that you have power but you are like the rest of us, reduced to receiving your share of food from enemy hands and with no means of punishing me if I rebel against you. As they forbid any authority other than theirs, you can neither beat me nor make me go without. Why should I obey you?"

This time it was clear that she was not taking in a word I was saying. I think she would rather have gone deaf. She muttered, fidgeted a little, then signalled to two younger women to come and help her up, although she could in fact manage unaided, and returned to her usual position at

the other end of the cage. The women stared at her intently, without daring to ask any questions. She closed her eyes to give the impression that she was thinking, and fell asleep.

"It's because she's old," said the younger ones, "an ordeal like that is too much for a woman of her age."

They resumed their chatter and I returned to my story. I was back in the gloomy cell where I was in solitary confinement. I was not injured, the guards were always careful not to resort to blows. I was huddled in a corner, terrified, and my humiliating posture shocked me. Crouched, trembling – was that fitting for someone who had just confronted one of the most respected women in the cage, looking her in the eyes and telling her she was a fool? She had been lost for words. I felt a delicious shiver. That was, I think, my first intellectual pleasure. In my imaginary cell, I had to stand up, and now, I had to smile, to defy them. It was hard to concentrate on the story, I had enjoyed the minor struggle I had just waged and I wanted to think about it, but that did not cause the eruption because the young guard was not part of it, and I called on my inner discipline to return to my private world.

If the women had had any sense, they would have let matters rest there. It was still possible to pretend that nothing had happened and avoid an unequal battle. I had realised that I was as strong as they were and that not confiding a secret, which is within the reach of everybody as long as there is no torture, immediately makes the secret seem infinitely precious. Their knowledge on the subject of love had seemed to me the ultimate object of desire when they refused to share it with me. Now, I scorned their pettiness, I told myself that in other times, I would

have got what I wanted from the first boy who came along. In asking it of the women, I was granting them a prerogative that they had never had, and it only emphasised my ignorance. But, now that their curiosity was aroused, it was their turn to feel excluded and scorned. I had found the eruption to console me: they remained disgruntled, powerless, sustained only by their gnawing exasperation. They began to watch me.

But: watch? There were forty of us living in this big underground room where nobody could hide from the others. At five-metre intervals, columns supported the vaulted ceiling, bars separated our living area from the walls, leaving a wide passage all around for the perpetual pacing up and down of the guards. Nobody ever escaped scrutiny and we were used to answering the call of nature in front of each other. At first – so they told me, my memories did not go back that far – the women were most put out, they thought of forming a human wall to screen the woman relieving herself, but the guards prohibited it, as no woman was to be shielded from view. I found it perfectly natural, when I went to pass water, to go and sit on the toilet seat and carry on my conversation, on the few occasions when I was engaged in conversation. The old women cursed furiously, they spoke of the indignity of being reduced to the level of animals. If the only thing that differentiates us from animals is the fact that we hide to defecate, then being human rests on very little, I thought. I never argued with the women, in fact I already found them stupid, but I had not formulated it so clearly.

When I think back on it today, what a horrid little prig I was! I prided myself and revelled in having found a distraction that I thought was extraordinary, and I felt as

though I were being hounded by a mob, when we were all equally helpless prisoners. Perhaps, isolated as a result of my age and the constraints imposed on us, I needed, like the others, to create an illusion to cope with the distress. I have no idea. Now that I am no longer able to go off hiking, I think a lot, but without anyone to talk to, my thoughts soon start going round in circles. That is why it is interesting to write them down: when they recur, I recognise them and I don't repeat them.

When Dorothy awoke and found the strength to relate our conversation to the others, she did not tell them that I had called her a fool, but, despite her efforts not to tarnish her image, she knew nothing of my secret and was unable to conceal the fact.

"A secret! A secret! What right has she to keep a secret in a situation like this?"

Anthea, who was the most intelligent of the women, understood immediately that it was not the actual content of the secret that mattered, but the fact that it was possible to claim to have a secret and be believed, while living under the continual scrutiny of the other women. This seemed too complicated for the women to grasp, they dismissed Anthea with a gesture of annoyance and demanded that the secret be prised from me.

"We must force her. Make her tell us."

"How will you do that?"

Carol, the stupidest and the most excitable, parked herself in front of me and commanded me in a threatening tone to speak.

"Or else, watch out!"

"Or else what?" I burst out laughing.

She made a violent gesture, it was obvious she was

thinking of slapping me. It was so obvious that the guards who never took their eyes off us saw her at the same time as I did, and we heard the crack of the whip. We knew that they were not aiming the blows at us, and that the whips only cracked in the air of the corridor around the cage, but that noise always frightened us and Carol jumped. None of the women remembered actually being hit, but Anthea told me about it later, it must have happened in the hazy period at the beginning of our imprisonment for such a deep fear to have taken hold of us. Nobody ever disobeyed the whip, and the women sometimes described the bloody marks that the thongs made on bare skin, the searing pain that lasted for days. Several of the women bore long white scars. Terrified, Carol withdrew, and I gave her a sardonic smile. I was torn between the desire to scoff at her in silence, making the guards my allies, and that of explaining her stupidity and helplessness to her, when Anthea intervened. She came over to Carol who was shaking with rage and fear, and motioned to her to move away.

"Come, it's pointless," she said very softly.

A tremor ran through Carol's body, I thought she was going to fling herself into Anthea's arms, but we knew only too well that we were forbidden to touch each other, and she hung her head.

"Come," repeated Anthea.

They went off side by side. I settled down again, my head on my knees, glad to be left in peace at last, and I realised that I was unable to immerse myself in my story again. This business had made me jumpy, I did not feel like sitting still, I could not regain my concentration. I rose and joined the women who were preparing the vegetables and offered to help them. But I was clumsy and it annoyed them.

"Oh, go away and play!" said one of them.

"Who with?"

I was the youngest, the only one who had still been a child when we were locked up. The women had always thought that I had been put among them by mistake, that in the chaos I had been sent to the wrong side and nobody had noticed. Once the cages were locked, they would probably never re-open. Sometimes, they even said that the keys must be lost, and that, even if they wanted to, they would not be able to release us. I think it was a joke, but I had forgotten about it until now, and it is too late to check whether it was or not.

Alice, the woman who had scolded me, seemed embarrassed. She looked at me sadly, perhaps she felt sorry for me and condemned the determination of the women who wanted to wrest my secret from me.

"It's true, poor thing. You are all alone." She looked touched, and that calmed me down a little. The women were not often kind to me. I suppose that at that time they resented my being there, alive, when they did not know what had happened to their own daughters. No doubt the appalling catastrophe that had befallen us was the reason for their attitude: none of them ever bothered about me, or made the slightest attempt to comfort me. But perhaps it was not possible to comfort? My own mother was not with us, we had no idea what had become of the others, we thought that they were probably all dead. I have raked through my memories; at that time, I thought I saw them swaying and groaning, they were crying and shivering with terror. None of them looked at me and I hated them. I thought it was unfair, and then I understood that alone and terrified, anger was my only weapon against the horror.

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I moved away from Alice and went and sat down again, my legs tucked under me, but I was unable to resume my reverie. I was bored. For lack of any other distraction, I began observing them. That day, we had been given leeks and coarsely cut mutton. As they cleaned the vegetables, they argued noisily over how they would cook it. I never paid much attention to what I ate, which in my view was neither good nor bad, unless I was still hungry when my plate was empty, which was rare because I had little appetite, but listening to them talk, I was amazed – anyone would think they had the choice between several recipes and a variety of seasonings, when in fact they only had three large pots and water. They never had any option but to boil the vegetables. We would eat them for lunch and the stock would serve as soup in the evening. Sometimes, extra food was brought in the afternoon, a few kilos of pasta, very occasionally potatoes, nothing that gave much scope for imagination. This was probably their way of telling each other stories, they did what they could. They said – and I had heard it hundreds of times, but without taking any notice – that the stock tastes different depending on whether you put the meat in first or the vegetables, that you could also cook the ingredients separately, cut the leeks into thin strips or large chunks, or reduce the stock to make it tastier. They bustled around chatting. It was the first time I listened closely, and I was astonished at how much they had to say, the passion with which they repeated the same thing in ten different ways so as to avoid noticing, in fact, that they had had absolutely nothing to say to each other for ages, but human beings need to speak, otherwise they lose their humanity, as I have realised these last few years. And gradually, I began to feel sorry

for them, these women determined to live, to pretend that they were active, to make decisions in the prison where they were locked up for ever, from which death was the only release – but would they remove the bodies? – and where they could not even kill each other.

I suddenly found myself contemplating our situation. Until that moment, I had endured it without thinking about it, as if it were a natural state. Do we wonder why we are sleepy at night, or hungry when we wake up? I knew, as did the others, that suicide was one of the things that was prohibited. At first, some of the more desperate or more active women had tried the knife, or the rope, and that showed how closely the guards were watching us, for they immediately heard the crack of the whip. They were excellent marksmen, reaching their target from a distance, slashing the belts the women were hoping to use as ropes, jerking the crudely sharpened knife from the hands that held it. They wanted to ensure we stayed alive, which made the women think that they wanted to use us in some way, that there were plans. They imagined all sorts of things, but nothing ever happened. We were fed, not over-generously, which caused those who were too fat to lose weight, and we were not really lacking for anything. We had to cook our meals in huge pots and, when the vegetables were peeled, hand back the two blunt knives. From time to time we were given a few lengths of fabric to make clothes, crudely cut as we had no scissors, and we had to tear the fabric very carefully. I wrote a moment ago that nothing ever happened, but that is not exactly true: the arrival of the pieces of material created great excitement. We knew which dresses were worn out beyond repair, and which ones could still be salvaged, and we would embark on

complicated calculations to enable us to make the best use of the new cotton. We had to take into account the quantity of thread that came with it, sometimes there were remnants of fabric but we had nothing with which to sew them together. One day, Dorothy came up with the idea of sewing with hair. She remembered that, a very long time ago, hair had been used for embroidery. Anna and Laura had the longest hair, which we used for our first attempts. They were unsuccessful, the hairs broke, then someone suggested plaiting several hairs and we achieved a certain degree of success: the stitches did not hold for long, but there was plenty more hair to redo them. The guards did not give us sanitary towels or toilet paper, which the women complained about a great deal. I did not remember ever using either, so I managed very well with running water, which was in plentiful supply, and as I did not have periods, I did not have the worry of what to do about the blood. The tiniest scraps of material were carefully collected and the women used them for their periods, then rinsed them thoroughly in the water, for we received very little soap, which was black and runny, and was kept for washing our bodies.

This almost total absence of physical activity would have made us weak, and we forced ourselves to do exercises every day, which was the most horribly boring thing in the world, but even I put up with it because I realised it was necessary. Once or twice a woman was ill: a thermometer was included in the supplies and the whip made it clear that she was to take her temperature. Medicine would arrive if she was feverish. We seem to have been in rather good health. What with the food and the continuous lighting and heating, we must have been costing

someone or something a lot of money, but we did not know why they were going to all this trouble. In their previous lives, the women had worked, borne children, made love. All I knew was that this was greatly valued. What use were we here?

I was taken aback by my thoughts. Suddenly, the secret that was being denied me and the one I did not want to share seemed to be of little worth compared with that of the guards: what were we doing here, and why were we being kept alive?

I joined Anthea who had always been the least hostile towards me. She smiled at me.

"Well, have you come to tell me your secret?"

I gave an irritable shrug.

"Don't be as stupid as the others," I said, "look at them. They are pretending, they behave as though they still have some control over their lives and make momentous decisions about which vegetable to cook first. What are we doing here?"

Anthea looked aloof.

"What do you mean?"

"We can't talk about that either! You spend your time kidding yourself that you know things, and you are using me, who doesn't know a thing, to convince yourself of your superiority! Nobody has any idea why we are being so carefully guarded and you're afraid to think about it."

"Don't always talk about us as a group."

"Well let's talk about you. Answer me with your own thoughts. If you have any."

We are not allowed to slap each other, but if we speak calmly, without our faces betraying anger, we can exchange cutting words.

"What's the use of talking about it? It won't make any difference."

"There you go again with your stupidity! As if talking only served to make things happen. Talking is existing. Look: they know that, they talk for hours on end about nothing."

"But will talking teach us anything about what we are doing here? You have no more idea than I or any of the rest of us."

"No, but I'll know what you think, you'll know what I think, and perhaps that will spark off a new idea, and then we'll feel as if we're behaving like human beings rather than robots."

She put down the piece of fabric she was sewing with plaited hairs and crossed her hands on her knees.

"Is that what you are doing, when you are sitting down alone with your eyes closed, thinking about us?"

"I do as I please. Don't try and force my secret out of me, I'm not a featherbrain who can be tricked so easily."

She laughed.

"You would have been very bright! You would have had a great future, you would!"

"We have no future any more. All we can do is entertain ourselves by conversing."

"You make fun of the discussion over the vegetables, and yet what you suggest is equally pointless repetition."

I began to laugh. It was most enjoyable having someone as intelligent as myself to talk to.

"I find the subject more interesting. Do we know why they locked us up?"

"No."

"Or where the others are?"

"If there is a reason, we don't know what it is. As we are here, and are being kept alive, we think there must be others alive somewhere, but there is no evidence, and that's just as well. Nobody has any idea what's behind it. There isn't the slightest clue. They rounded up adults, you are almost certainly here by accident. At first – well, not really at first, for there is a period that remains confused in everybody's minds, but after that, from the time when our memories became clearer, we know we used to think all the time. They could have killed you – but they don't kill – or taken you away, sent you elsewhere, if there are other prisons like this one, but then your arrival would have brought news, and the only thing we are certain of is that they don't want us to know anything. We came to the conclusion that they left you here because any decision can be analysed, and that their lack of decision indicated the only thing they wanted us to know, which is that we must know nothing."

Never had any of the women spoken to me for so long. I sensed that she had passed on to me everything she knew, and I experienced a mild light-headedness that was rather pleasant. It reminded me vaguely of the eruption and I promised myself I'd see if I could work it into one of my stories.

"Nothing else?"

"Nothing."

She sighed and took up her needlework, inspecting it mechanically.

"And we will never know any more. We will die, one at a time, as age gets the better of us. Dorothy will probably be the first, she has a bad heart. She looks over seventy. I don't think I've reached forty yet: with no seasons, we can't keep track of time. You will be the last."

She stared at me for a long time without saying a word. As I had greatly exercised my imagination of late, I could guess her thoughts: one day, I would be alone in the huge grey room. In the morning, a guard would pass me my food, which I would cook on the hotplate, I would eat, sleep and die alone, without having understood our fate or why it had been inflicted on us. I was paralysed with fear.

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"There is not one of us who has not thought of killing herself, but they are too quick. You mustn't try and hang yourself: twist a piece of fabric into a rope and the minute you start tying it to the bars, they will be there. Mary, who is sitting over there talking to Dorothy, tried to starve herself to death: they chased her with the whip and harassed her until she gave up. You know the knives they give us: they don't cut a thing, they're just about good enough for scraping carrots, and we're forbidden to try and sharpen them. Once, a long time ago, Alice, one of the most desperate women, persuaded another woman to strangle her. It happened at night, when they turn the lights down. We thought that the guards were pacing up and down automatically, deceived by our stillness: but they watch us so closely, all the time, that they realised and the whips cracked."

"They never touch us."

"Once they did, there were wounds that were very slow to heal. We don't know why they stopped. There's no point rebelling. We must just wait until we die."

She resumed her sewing. She was piecing together the least worn bits of a dress to make something or other. When I think back on it, I tell myself the lengths of fabric were almost excessive: it was hot in the bunker and we

could have lived without clothes. I picture the two latrines in the middle of the room. As there were forty of us, there was nearly always a woman sitting there doing her business, and I found it hard to believe that they allowed us to cover ourselves to satisfy our modesty. I watched Anthea and it occurred to me that since I was to be the last, I had better learn to sew one day. Unless, as the women died, they left me their clothing and, with these inherited rags, I would have something to wear until the end.

I was sad. I had always hated my cell mates because of their indifference to me and I had never spared a thought for them. On our arrival here, they had been overwhelmed by their despair, their fear, and I had remained isolated, a terrified little girl surrounded by weeping women. In dying, once again they would be abandoning me. Anger welled up inside me. So they had thought about our situation, they had wondered about it for a long time and had always excluded me from their discussions. Anthea was the first to take the trouble to talk to me. I had found this conversation interesting, I had been determined to listen to her, to think, as if for years she had not ignored me in the way the others had.

"Why are you talking to me today?"

She looked taken aback.

"But you're the one who came to talk to me," she said. "You are always on your own, as if you don't want to join in with us."

I was about to tell her that they always stopped talking when I drew near, but suddenly I felt terribly tired. Perhaps I was not used to talking at such length. She saw me yawn.

"They'll be turning the lights down soon. Let's get ready for bed. We'll talk more tomorrow."

Of course I could not sleep. I wanted to carry on with the story that Annabel had interrupted at the point when I was in a cell waiting for the young guard to appear, but I could not concentrate. Usually, when I told myself a story, I became completely impervious to what was going on around me, but that evening, the comings and goings of the women arranging mattresses, whispering, the gradual descent of silence, everything disrupted my train of thought. I reflected on the years, the grief, those lost husbands, the children they had never seen again, and wondered about my mother, since I must have had a mother. I did not remember her, I only knew that there must have been someone I called mummy, and who was not in the prison. Was she dead? I went over the little I had heard about the catastrophe, it boiled down to a few words: screams, the scramble, night and a growing terror. They thought they must have fainted, perhaps several times, and that everything had happened very quickly, but on reflection I concluded that the explanation was not enough. There were forty of us, who had nothing in common, whereas each woman, before, had had a family, parents, brothers, sisters, friends: only a meticulous selection could have only brought together strangers. This was confirmed by Anthea the next day:

"Just think what a huge job that must have been: they made sure that none of us knew any of the others. They took us from all four corners of the country, and even from several countries, checking that fate had not thrown together two cousins or friends separated by circumstances."

"Why? What are they looking for?"

"We nearly drove ourselves mad asking that same question. You were too little, you couldn't understand,

and you would curl up into a ball on the ground, you didn't answer when we spoke to you."

"I don't remember that."

"We didn't think you'd get over it. As we weren't allowed to touch each other, nobody could pick you up and cuddle you, or try and comfort you, or even make you eat. We thought you were going to die, but, very gradually, you began to move again. You sidled up to the food at mealtimes and swallowed a few mouthfuls. Then, naturally, we got into the habit of never going over our few memories in front of you, we thought it would be bad for you. And, gradually, we wearied of talking about them amongst ourselves. It didn't help. Asking the same questions, in the same way, for years – you automatically tire of it."

"And you live like this, with your vegetables, with no prospects?"

"Yes, death," she snapped. "We can't commit suicide, but we will still die. We just have to wait."

I had never thought about our situation so clearly. In my stories, there were always things happening: in my life, nothing would ever happen. I realised that she was right and that the secrets of love were none of my business. They had perhaps played at knowing more than me because they knew nothing of the essential. I suspected that the men had not complied like the women: but since I would never encounter a man, what did this difference matter? It was the girls in another time who had to be prepared for their wedding night, I told myself.

That day seemed very short, which I put down to the intensity of my thinking. When the lights were turned down, we had to lay out the forty mattresses on which we slept. There was not enough room, they were almost

touching, and every morning we piled them up three or four high so that we could move around and sit on them. I stretched out and tried to pick up the story, but was unable to, my mind was blank and there was a kind of huge grief in my breast.

"Close your eyes," my neighbour said, "don't let them see that you're not asleep."

"Why?"

It was Frances, one of the younger women, one of those who had never laughed at me.

"Don't you notice anything? Anyone would think you had just come from another planet. They won't allow us not to sleep. If they see your eyes open they call you over to the bars and make you take a pill."

"Call? But they never talk to us!"

"Oh yes they do! With their whips!"

I understood what she meant. It was very rare for a woman to disobey: but when it happened, the whip cracked beside her, until she did as she was told. They were relentless, and handled their whips with the utmost precision: they could crack it twenty times in a row by someone's ear, and if the woman it was intended for resisted, there was always another who gave in. When Alice whom they had forced to eat tried to strangle herself with her dress twisted into a rope, Claudia had relented and rushed to undo the knot and halt the appalling threat of death, always promised, never given. I closed my eyes.

"What's stopping you from getting to sleep?" asked Frances.

"How do you get to sleep?"

She did not reply. I was choked by sobs.

"Are we allowed to cry? Without pills?"

"No, you'd better control yourself."

Then, something strange happened inside me, I wanted to feel her arms around me and it was so sudden, so unexpected, that I was overwhelmed by it. I flung myself into her arms before I realised what I was doing.

"Stop!" she whispered, horrified.

And the whip cracked above my head. I recoiled, terrified. It was the first time it had been aimed at me. I still shudder to think of it. I huddled up, panting as if I had been running.

Running? I had never run!

And yet I knew very well that we were not allowed to touch each other and, as I had never known any different, I took it for granted. The rush of feeling I had just experienced aroused confused notions in me: holding hands, walking with arms around each other, holding each other – these words were part of my vocabulary, they described gestures that I had never made. A walk? I remembered maybe lawns, or seasons, because those words had a very distant ring, a faint echo that soon died away. I knew the flaking grey walls, the bars at fifteen-centimetre intervals, the guards pacing regularly up and down around the perimeter of the room.

"What do they want of us?" I asked again.

She shrugged.

"All we know is what they don't want."

She looked away and it was plain that the conversation was at an end. Anthea was the first woman to talk to me for any length of time, perhaps she would be the only one?

I concentrated on keeping my eyes closed, in the hope that by dint of pretending, I would eventually fall asleep. For the first time, I understood that I was living at the

very heart of despair. I had insulated myself from it: I had believed that it was out of bitterness, but suddenly I believed it was out of caution, and that all these women who lived without knowing the meaning of their lives were mad. Whether it was their fault or not, they had become mad by force of circumstance, they had lost their reason because nothing in their lives made sense any more.

I did not know how old I was. As I did not have periods and I had virtually no breasts, some of the women thought I was not yet fourteen, barely thirteen, but Anthea, who was more logical than the others, thought that I must be about fifteen or sixteen.

"We don't know how long we've been here. Looking at your height, you are no longer a child, and some of us stopped menstruating a long time ago. Anna is young, she doesn't have any wrinkles, neither do I, so they say. It isn't the menopause that has withered us, it is despair."

"So men were very important?"

She nodded.

"Men, child, mean you are alive. What are we, without a future, without children? The last links in a broken chain."

"So life gave so much pleasure?"

"You have so little idea what it meant to have a destiny that you can't understand what it means to be deprived as we are. Look at the way we live: we know we have to behave as if it's morning, because they make the lights brighter, then they pass us food and at a given time, the lights are turned down. We are not even certain that they make us live according to a twenty-four hour pattern. How would we measure time? They have reduced us to utter helplessness."

Her tone was harsh, she stared straight ahead of her,

I sensed that, once again, I wanted to cry. I curled up into a ball.

"What's the matter?"

And suddenly her voice was so gentle, so lilting, that I trembled as if being caressed. At least, I suppose it could be described thus: something exquisite coursed through me, so delicious that it frightened me. I huddled up even tighter.

"I don't want to talk any more," I told her. "I was happier when I hadn't understood anything, when I hated you all because you kept your secrets. You don't have any. You have nothing, and there is nothing to be had."

"What secrets did you think we had?"

I no longer felt humiliated by my ignorance, since I had touched on a knowledge that was too painful to bear.

"How you make love, with what, what happens, all that. There they are, telling each other stories from the past, making allusions and bursting out laughing, and shutting up when I approach. I thought that was what was important, and it's all pointless."

"Poor child," she said, so tenderly and so sadly that I burst into tears.

They probably tolerated crying, as long as we sobbed quietly and didn't cause a stir: the whip did not crack.

There was a bit of a flurry, as some food arrived. When we felt hungry for the second time since the morning, we said it was the evening. We cooked whatever there was, we ate, and shortly afterwards the lights dimmed. The women said that, before the catastrophe, it had been customary to eat three times a day, in the morning, at noon and in the evening, but we only felt hungry twice during each waking period and we were not sure that we were

living according to the same pattern as before. It was one of the arguments that came up time and time again, but kept going round in circles because nothing ever changed. Was it that we needed less food as we did not work, and two meals a day were sufficient? Had our bodies forgotten old habits to the extent that we could sleep every eight or ten hours? But, did we know how long we slept? Perhaps they kept us awake for eight hours and only gave us nights of four hours, or six? The guards were relieved at intervals that did not correspond to those of our lives, sometimes in the middle of the day, sometimes at night, or twice in one day. I watched them, mustering the little I knew, when I became aware that the young guard with blue eyes must have been away: suddenly, I saw him, pacing up and down the length of the cage, and I realised that I had not thought about him any more and that I had not told myself any stories for several days. He still looked just as handsome.

I went to fetch my plate of food and sat down next to Anthea.

"Handsome," I asked her, "beautiful – I suppose they are words from before, from when things happened?"

She gazed at me for a while, then looked away.

"I was beautiful," she said. "I don't know if I still am, I'd need a mirror. My hair has turned grey, but that doesn't mean I'm old, the women in my family go grey early. My memories are muddled, I think I was twenty-eight the year they locked us up. At first, I still took the trouble to do my hair, and I was very upset about losing my brushes."

She spoke in a half-whisper, as if to herself, but I knew she was talking to me.

"And then my dress wore out. It was a pretty summer dress, very fashionable, with flounces, in that flimsy material

that doesn't last very long. I was one of the first to wear these sort of tunics we make. Now, there are no dresses from before left, not even any scraps, they've all been used down to the last thread. You can't imagine what they were like."

"Being beautiful, was that for the men?"

I was almost sure it was, but I sometimes heard the women say otherwise.

"Yes. Some women say that it is for ourselves. What on earth can we do with it? I could have loved myself whether I was hunchbacked or lame, but to be loved by others, you had to be beautiful."

"Am I beautiful?"

I saw her smile, but her smile was heart-rending.

"Yes," she said. "Yes. You would probably have been one of the prettiest girls, because you wouldn't have had that sulky, angry expression, you would have laughed, you would have provoked the boys."

"Sometimes I provoke the young guard," I burst out.

This I had just understood.

When I told myself stories, I always went to sit close to the bars, on the side where he paced up and down. He walked slowly, keeping a close watch on what was going on in the cage, as he always did. Crouching down, facing him, I kept still, following him with my eyes. I watched him, and as he saw everything, he could not have been unaware that I was watching him. Just a girl, sitting down, wearing her shapeless tunic. My hair was long and I wore it tied back at the nape of my neck: other than that, I have no idea what I looked like. I did not even know what colour my eyes were until Anthea told me, later, and I had no idea what that meant, to be one of the prettiest girls. I did not think that none of the women was

beautiful: they were clean, we kept the little soap we were given for washing ourselves and our hair, which was always clean. We nearly all wore long hair, as we had nothing to cut it with, or for cutting our nails which were always breaking when they were too long, and we looked sad, except when there were outbursts of nervous giggles. I do not know what expression I wore when I looked at the guard: I was totally preoccupied, I was all eyes. He never looked at me: I was sure he knew I was staring at him continually and that it made him feel awkward.

"I'd like to make him lose his composure."

"Whatever for?" asked Anthea, in surprise.

"I don't know. To have power over him. They have the whip and they make us do what they want, which is almost nothing. They forbid everything. I'd like him to be upset, worried, afraid, unable to react. We've never been forbidden to sit and stare."

"Perhaps they'll forbid it. They forbid what they like."

"Then they would be recognising my existence. If you do something that is forbidden, it is the action that is the target. If you do something that isn't forbidden, and they intervene, then it's not the activity that is attracting attention, it is you yourself."

She was the most intelligent of the women, but I had understood something that she had not thought of, so I was at least as intelligent as she was! A delicious thrill ran through me and I smiled at her.

"They feed forty women, they keep them warm and give them fabric to make clothes. For them, we have no names, they treat us as if nothing distinguishes us from each other. But I'm me. I'm not a fortieth of the herd, one cow among the others. I'm going to stare at him until he's embarrassed."

I marvelled at my own audacity. For years, we had been here, reduced to utter helplessness, deposed, deprived even of instruments with which to kill ourselves, defecating under the full glare of the lights, in front of everybody, in front of them: and I wanted to embarrass a guard and thought I had found the way to do it.

"Don't breathe a word to anyone. I don't want the women to know what's going on. They would change their attitude, they wouldn't be able to help it and what I am doing would lose all its power."

"Suppose we all started staring at them, wouldn't they be even more embarrassed?"

"They would no longer be embarrassed at all."

The thoughts came to me with dazzling certainty and I felt absolutely sure of them. Where did I get them from? I still do not know, only that I derived enormous pleasure from what was going on in my mind.

"Something that everybody does becomes meaningless. It's just a habit, a custom, nobody knows when it started, they just repeat it mechanically. If I want to annoy him, I must be the only one to stare at him."

Anthea thought. I am not sure she completely understood me, I was driven by an unquestionable authority and nothing was going to stop me.

"I don't know what all this may lead to," I told her, "but that's what is so exciting: in our absurd existence, I've invented something unexpected."

She gently nodded her head.

"Go on," she said, "and I shall carry on thinking about it."

And I resumed my position, sitting cross-legged, my eyes riveted on the young guard.

Was he really handsome or did I only find him handsome because he was the only man who was not old? I, who knew so little, and who did not remember the world, did recognise the signs of age. I had seen hair turn grey, and then white, speckles appear, baldness threaten the head of the eldest women, wrinkles, dry skin, folds, weakening tendons, stooped backs. The guard had clear skin, his step was supple as I knew mine was, despite the little space there was for me to try it, he was upright and young like me. I found that strange: were there not enough old men left? Perhaps they were all dead? Or did they not know what to do with the young men, they could not think of any more tasks to set them and so they sent them to pace up and down between the bars and the wall? Before, there had not been any young guards, I said to myself, and my heart began to race. How long had he been there? It seemed to me that I had not noticed him straightaway, I had not counted the days, I did not know when I had started making up stories, for I had no reference points. If I was not mistaken, if his presence was recent, then, for the first time in years, something had changed. Outside, beyond the walls, in that outside world which was totally concealed from us except for the food we ate and the fabric they gave us, things had happened and these events affected us. The guards had always been so old that we did not notice them age. I had been a little girl when I arrived, now I was a woman, a virgin for ever, but an adult despite my under-developed breasts and my aborted puberty: I had grown, my body had recorded the passing of time. The old women did not change any more than the old guards, their hair had turned white, but it happens so slowly that it is hardly noticeable. I had been a clock: watching me, the

women watched their own time tick by. Maybe that was why they did not like me, perhaps the mere fact of my existence made them cry. The young guard was not a child when he arrived, he was tall, with thick hair, there were no lines on his face: when he showed the first signs of withering, then I would feel my own skin to see whether I was getting older. He too would be a clock, we would grow old at the same speed, I could watch him and judge, from the suppleness of his step, how much time I had left.

So, there had been a change. Somewhere, a decision had been taken which affected us, the impact of which we could assess: one of the old men had disappeared – perhaps he was dead – and had been replaced. Had this escaped the notice of those who governed our lives, were they not concerned about giving us a piece of information, or had they relaxed their vigilance?

I did not take my eyes off the guards. They always went in threes, pacing up and down the corridor. They did not speak to each other. When they passed each other, their eyes did not meet but it seemed to me that they watched each other as closely as they watched us. The authorities must have been afraid that they would disobey orders, or that they would speak to us. Once again, I had a sudden insight, I understood why they had to be in threes: it prevented any complicity between them, they were not allowed private conversations, which might have conveyed something to us, they had to maintain the role of suspicious jailers all the time. The two men on duty with the young guard had been there for a long time. During the early years, the women had tried to talk to the guards, to make demands or to move them to pity, but nothing could break down their cruel indifference. Then, they gave

up and behaved as though they could not see the guards, as though they had banished their presence from their minds – or as if they themselves were bars that the women had become so used to that they no longer bumped into them. Nobody imagined that they felt in the least humiliated, but the prisoners' pride was preserved intact. They did not complain to the guards any more and no longer took their imperturbability as an insult. And so, the gaze of this girl, sitting absolutely still, was probably all the more powerful.

I no longer told myself stories: watching the guard, I was creating one. I needed patience, I had nothing else to give. I do not know how many waking periods were spent thus. I thought a lot, and it occurred to me that we should no longer think in terms of day and night, but of waking and sleeping periods. My certainty grew stronger: we were not living according to a twenty-four hour cycle. When the lights were turned down, nobody was tired: the women said it was because they had nothing to do. Perhaps they were right, but I did not know what it was like to work. My conviction came from continually watching the young guard. The relief guards did not come when we awoke, at mealtimes or when we went to bed, when we were moving around all over the place, but in-between, at irregular intervals. The main door would open a fraction, the three men pacing up and down around the cage would converge, and sometimes they would all leave the room while the next shift entered it, and sometimes only one or two were replaced. Was there any connection between their timetable and ours? How could I measure the passing of time? The only indicators I had were my body rhythms.

Anthea taught me that the heart always beats at the same rate, between seventy and seventy-four times a minute in a healthy person.

I began to count.

I had learned very little. Thirty, forty, fifty, seventy, eighty, I had to sort out the tens in my mind, but then I realised I did not know my tables and I barely knew how to do division. If, between the time when they turned the lights full on and the time when the guards changed shift, when the young guard came on duty, my heart had beaten seven thousand two hundred times, that would have made a hundred minutes, then it was just a question of multiplying Anthea's seventy-two by a hundred, but what I had was three thousand, two hundred and twenty, or five thousand and twelve! I was not capable of performing the necessary operations. It was all very well concentrating and counting, but I could not make use of the figures I obtained.

"Can you teach me to do sums?" I asked Anthea.

"Without pencil and paper?"

She explained:

"We are not as heartless as you think, and we have discussed your education a great deal. Teach you to read? With what, and to read what? Counting was possible up to a point, but only for mental calculations and we weren't able to show you arithmetical operations. You would not know how to read a number. Helen and Isabel taught you your tables, but you must have forgotten them because you never used them. Besides, when you realised that it wasn't a game, you refused, it made you cross. We couldn't force you and we couldn't punish you, because of the guards. We couldn't make you want to learn things you

couldn't see the point of and, in the end, we didn't really see the need. Eight eights, and what then? What do you find sixty-four of here? Was there any point teaching you anything?"

I knew what reading was, but I had never seen anything written. At most, I had understood the idea of letters, of their configuration, of words. They had spoken of books, of poets.

"If ever we get out, I'll be stupid."

"If ever . . ."

She stared at me and I understood that images were going through her mind, of which I had no idea. Of course, I must have seen the sun, the trees, days and nights: I had no recollection whatsoever and although I could guess what filled Anthea's inner gaze, I could not picture these things.

"I'm afraid there's no chance of that, you poor child," she said at last, "but it's true that if that were to happen, you would be able to reproach us for having been very bad teachers, and we would delight in your reproaches."

I looked at the women: they had just been given the vegetables, and were bustling about as usual, trying to find a new way of cooking cabbage and carrots, when all they had was water and salt. They did not seem so stupid, for I understood that, having nothing in their lives, they took the little that came and made the best use of it, exploiting the slightest event to nourish their starving spirits.

"Yesterday, between the time when the lights came full on and when the young guard arrived, in other words when they changed shift, my heart produced three thousand, two hundred and twenty beats, and today, five thousand and twelve. How long is that?"

I saw her gasp.

"What? Did you count them?"

"It could help measure time."

The young guard paced slowly up and down the length of the cage, the other two followed a few steps behind him. They never moved away from each other, they never walked side by side. As I spoke to Anthea, I never took my eyes off my prey: he never looked in my direction.

"If you counted, the least I can do is try and work it out," she said. "It's such a long time since I did that! But do I know how fast your heart beats?"

"You told me what a normal rate was."

"Yes, but there are variations from one person to another, and how do I know whether your heart beats at a normal rate? I can't even take your pulse, we can't touch each other."

"I can take it, I already have. I'll say 'tick-tock' at each beat. Compare that with your own heart, it'll give us something to start from."

My rate was slower than hers.

"You're younger. You are probably closer to the average than I am, my heart used to beat quite fast. How can we tell?"

"What does it matter if the unit isn't precise. The main thing is to have a unit. Take seventy-two."

"No. As we can't be sure anyway, I'll divide by seventy. It's easier, and even then, I'm not sure I won't get in a muddle."

She fell silent, her eyes glazed over and she began to mumble. I listened to her, without taking my eyes off the guard.

"Three thousand, two hundred and twenty divided by

seventy makes forty-six. At least, I think it does. I'm amazed it goes exactly. I'm going to start again."

One of the old guards looked at me intently for two or three seconds.

"Yes, it's definitely forty-six. I'll try five thousand and twelve."

The guards had the time to complete their round before she finished.

"Seventy one or seventy two, there are fractions."

"So that's either forty-six minutes after we get up, or seventy-one or seventy-two?"

"Forty-six minutes, or one hour eleven minutes or twelve."

She was thrilled.

"How odd! What connection can there be between forty-six minutes and one hour twelve?"

I did not understand.

"We used to work seven or eight hours a day, depending on what our job was," she explained. "We would begin at the same time every day, or people worked shifts, to ensure continuity: but we never had variations of twenty-five or twenty-six minutes from one day to the next. Does that mean something?"

She was alluding to a way of life that I knew nothing about and I could only listen to her.

"Carry on counting. Count the times tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But was it tomorrow in the old sense of the word?"

This first achievement made me ambitious. I told myself that heartbeats were not the only rhythms, and I started listening to my body. I knew that menstruation occurred every twenty-eight days and I was saddened that I did not

possess that indicator, but I observed the variations in my appetite. Sometimes, I was very hungry on awakening, and it seemed a long time until the meal was ready. We had got it into our heads that they gave us food at specific times: I saw that this was mistaken. Between the two meals, sometimes three hours went by, sometimes five. When I had counted about ten times, it seemed that the young guard arrived at different times. I shall not list the figures I obtained – although I remember them perfectly, for they are the birth dates of my thoughts. Anthea found them so odd that she wondered whether the times were not completely random. But he almost never stayed longer than six hours, according to my heart. When he appeared, he looked fresh and rested – from watching him, I had come to know him well – but at the end of his shift, he showed little signs of fatigue. His step maintained its elasticity, he held his head high: I could not say precisely what suggested weariness. Was he a little paler? his gaze less penetrating? Were his movements just a fraction slower?

The relief guard always came on duty at times that were separate from our meal and sleep times. I found that strange.

"That gives us a clue," I told Anthea, "their time is not the same as ours. We live together, in fact, them and us: wouldn't it be natural for us to follow the same patterns?"

I could see that she did not understand.

"When one of the guards does not appear for seven or eight hours, presumably it's because he has gone off to sleep. But those periods are never the same as our sleep times. I shall have to keep watch, to make a mental note of their absences."

Anthea thought, then frowned and nodded.

"What can two different time patterns mean?"

"You have known the real world. I can't make anything of that."

She told me that she could not make any sense of it, that she could not connect the two things and that it was time to take the other women into our confidence.

"I can't think any more. It's all too complicated, I can't take in all the facts. We must share what we have discovered, and ask them what they think."

I was obviously none too pleased, but I realised that Anthea was out of her depth and I gave her my permission. She went about it through discreet little chats: she took one or two women to one side, warned them that she was about to tell them something astonishing and asked them to put on an expression that would not alert the guards. The idea of being astonished by the life we led already caused a stir, and Anthea quickly became adept at calming them down. During the early years, they had learned to control themselves, then, with the absurd monotony of the days, they had no longer had anything to control. The announcement of something new sent them into a panic. At first, the novelty itself was less of a shock than the fact of its existence. They said: "It's not possible!" and then they faltered. Anthea invented techniques. She began by saying: "Stay calm. Carry on with what you were doing" – peeling a vegetable, finishing off some sewing, plaiting their hair, there were so few things to do – "without altering your speed. To do that, you need to be aware of your speed, of your movements." On hearing this, the woman was of course intrigued, but only moderately. As we lived under surveillance, the idea of hiding behind an impassive attitude was quickly understood, and they

followed Anthea's orders without difficulty. The word got around that something extraordinary was happening and, above all, that they must not give anything away. It seemed to me that if there was a little tremor of excitement, it was discreet enough to escape the guards' attention. The women had chattered happily about everything when there was nothing to talk about, and there did not seem to be any difference. They took stock of what they knew about the world before, and realised that they had forgotten a lot. Most of them were not very well educated, and had lived quietly with their homes, their children, the shopping and house-work, I don't think they had much to forget. They began to think: their minds were rusty, they found it hard.

They could not think of anything.

Meanwhile, I carried on counting. Gradually, I managed to count without thinking, while I was chatting, eating, and soon, in my sleep. I woke up with a number in my mind: at first, it seemed improbable. I was dubious, then convinced. Anthea told me I had developed an aptitude which was perhaps not as extraordinary as all that, it was simply that nobody had ever needed it before.

I had counted my heartbeats one by one: I soon found myself faced with huge numbers that defied mental calculations. At seventy-two beats a minute, an hour was equal to more than four thousand two hundred, and by the end of the day I was over fifty thousand. It was no longer manageable. So I found a different technique: I counted seventy-two, I mentally chalked up one, then I started again and chalked up two, but I was afraid of getting muddled up with these two different scales. Then a woman would come along and act as an abacus: I would say one,

she remembered it, then I would say two. She soon became unnecessary, I did not make mistakes, I saw that I was keeping track of the figures accurately. Gradually, I no longer needed to recite the numbers, something fell into place inside me that alerted me automatically every seventy beats. I became a human clock.

Our days lasted between fifteen and eighteen hours, with anarchic variations. From the moment the lights were turned down, which we called the beginning of night, about six hours went by before we were awakened. It was thus established that we lived according to an artificial clock. We needed to understand why.

Emma put forward the craziest theory.

"We're not on Earth. We are on a planet which rotates every sixteen and a half hours."

"How would we have got here?"

"How did we get into the bunker?" I asked.

Nobody had the least idea, which astounded me.

I had put my own lack of memories down to the fact that I had been too young, to that state of shock that Anthea had described to me, but the others knew no more than I did. Apparently, life had been going on as usual, when suddenly, in the middle of a night that had begun like any other, there had been screams, flames, a stampede, things which I, who had always lived in the quiet of the bunker, could not imagine.

"There were strange drugs which affected the brain and created false memories," said Emma.

Anthea was not sure that was true. There had been all sorts of unconfirmed rumours, stories of brainwashing, of genetic engineering, of robots so sophisticated that they were mistaken for human beings.

"The truth is that none of us seems to have any coherent memories that would enable us to piece together what happened. We don't even know if there was a war," said Dorothy. "I can recall only vague images, I see flames, people running in all directions and I think I am tied up, that I am afraid. It lasts for a very long time, I'm still afraid but there aren't even any images any more."

"Well I can't even tell you that much," added Annabel. "There's my day-to-day life, and then a sort of panic which I've always been terrified of reliving. Then, I'm here, lying on a mattress and it feels perfectly normal."

"Wars aren't like that. There are bombs, air-raid sirens."

"There wasn't a war. Anyway, not where we were. Of course, they were troubled times, but educated people said that it had been ages since we had lived in peace."

"We were invaded by the Chinese. Or the Blacks."

"Or the Martians!"

They were as ready as ever to burst out laughing and I began to understand that it was not out of stupidity or hopelessness, but that it was a means of survival.

"But why would they have taken us to another planet? What use could we be to them?"

"Clearly none at all," chipped in another. "We are still on Earth. Fifteen or twenty years ago – no, less, you can tell from looking at the child – when we were locked up, there was a purpose, they were keeping us in reserve for something. And then a file got lost, the admin workers made sure nobody found out, they continued to guard us and keep us alive but nobody was responsible for us. We are the result of an administrative blunder."

"But sixteen hours! That doesn't explain sixteen hours!"

"And it's ridiculous that we can't find any pattern in the

guards' routine. My memories of before are fuzzy, but I'm sure we worked regular hours. We even had to clock on."

"Once, only once since I've been counting, the young guard stayed nearly eleven hours at a stretch, pacing up and down around the cage. By the end, he looked drawn and pale, but he did not complain. I've never seen him looking impatient," I said.

Our conversations followed these lines, going over and over the same ground. Attempts to recall the early years of imprisonment were fruitless. Apparently, the women had slowly emerged from an inner fog to find themselves accustomed to the strange life they led. Nothing suggested a rebellion. They had had husbands, lovers and children: they realised that as a result of being afraid to think of them, because it was so painful, they had forgotten almost everything. But they did not try to shut me up, because they were horrified at having lost their own history. Anthea gradually became convinced that they had been drugged.

"Look at us, look at how we live. We have been deprived of everything that made us human, but we organised ourselves, I suppose in order to survive, or because, when you're human, you can't help it. We made up new rules with what we had left, invented a code. The eldest pours the soup into the bowls, I supervise the sewing, when there is any, Annabel reconciles those who squabble, and we don't know how all that came about. We must have been living in a dream for a long time and when we woke up, we had adjusted to the situation."

"What about when Alice wanted to kill herself and Claudia stopped her?"

"That is one memory that stands out amidst all the confusion. Nobody knows when it was."

I had been counting for four months. We had decided no longer to worry about the anarchic routine they imposed on us, my heart would act as our clock. One evening, as the lights were being dimmed, we decided that it was eleven o'clock, and that from that moment, I would count the days as twenty-four hours, as before. Sometimes, when we were in the middle of lunch, joylessly eating the boiled vegetables, a woman would ask me the time and I would reply:

"Two o'clock in the morning."

That rekindled a spirit of rebellion in their numbed minds. We had our own time, which had nothing in common with that of those who kept us locked up, we rediscovered the quality of being human. We were no longer in league with the guards. Inside the bars, my strong, regular heart fuelled by youthful anger had restored to us our own territory, we had established an area of freedom. New jokes sprang up. When the hatch opened for the second time and we were given a few kilos of pasta, if it was eight o'clock in the morning according to my heart, there was always one woman who said:

"Ah! Here's breakfast!"

Or, if it was midnight:

"The show's over, let's have dinner in town."

And we would have a fit of giggles. I laughed too, I remember now, for I had stopped seeing the women as enemies since I had been giving them what I could: the time. I had not forgotten the young guard and, when he was on duty, I continued to watch him, sitting close to the bars, hoping that one day he would betray himself and give some sign that he had noticed me, but that did not happen. I still wonder whether it was out of discipline, or whether

he really had not been struck by the fact that one of the women, always the same one, never took her eyes off him for a moment. I did not tell myself any more stories.

I had created the only new thing possible in our static lives. While my gaze was riveted on the young guard, nobody disturbed me, so as to set me apart and draw attention to me. That left me plenty of time to think. I began to fear that once again, we would be stultified by habit. It seemed to me that certain discussions no longer aroused much interest, and some of the women began yawning when we tried once again to discover the rationale behind the time difference. They moaned that we were wearing ourselves out for nothing, that we would not find an explanation, that everything was arbitrary. I told myself that if their enthusiasm waned, I would once again start hating them and feeling alone, whereas I had been enjoying myself. They would go back to making jokes that excluded me and I would be angry once again. But Anthea thought that I was mistaken and that they really had woken up.

"It's even dangerous," she added. "I'm afraid that the guards will realise and that they'll drug us again. We'll sink back into apathy, we'll be half dead and we won't even realise it, I can't imagine anything more humiliating."

Inevitably, with memory comes pain. Sitting opposite each other, they found the courage to confront their scant memories. They tried to exhume the past in long conversations which groped their way around the obstacles, they fought against the amnesia which was perhaps a relief, and against fear. They listened to each other attentively, and when one of them had an idea, she interrupted the woman who was speaking, in a rush to get it out before she forgot it. But they maintained a certain reticence as protection

against the tears that would have alerted the guards. I was not excluded, I had earned my place among them, even though all I could do was listen.

But this did not last long, for suddenly, there was a major happening.

I MUST DESCRIBE IT IN precise detail, which I find very difficult, because of the shock and amazement. It happened just as the guards were opening the hatch to give us our food. The pots and pans always stayed inside the cage, we piled them up beside the sinks, but we had to hand back the plates which we slid between the bars after each meal. The food arrived on huge trolleys, we had to pick it up with our hands and place it in the containers, which was both unpleasant and difficult. At the back of the room, on the other side of the bars, a big metal door would slide open a fraction, instantly sparking off our curiosity. What would we have today? What would we be able to do with it? Two of the guards would go over to the door, pulling the trolley, while the third would continue to watch us, his whip at the ready. First of all, we had to take the soup ladle, the forty spoons and the blunt knives which we used to peel the vegetables. That day, there were carrots and beef cut into coarse chunks, and the women immediately began arguing over whether they would cook all the carrots or keep some to eat raw. There were also potatoes, which delighted everyone, for they were a rare treat. They said it was odd, for in the past world, potatoes had been very cheap and a food so rich in various things that, according

to Anthea, you could stay healthy eating nothing but potatoes. But we found the quantity of food insufficient, even for the tiny appetites of women who were inactive and had virtually nothing to do, so the pleasure was short-lived. One of the guards slid a key into the lock of the little hatch. At that precise moment, there was a terrifyingly loud noise.

I had never heard anything like it, but the women stood froze, for they had recognised the sirens. It was an ear-piercingly loud, continuous wail. I was dumbstruck and I think that, for the first time since I had acquired it, I lost count of time. The women who were sitting down leapt up, those who were at the bars collecting the food, sprang back. The guard let go of the bunch of keys, leaving them in the lock and turned to face the others. They looked at each other for a moment and then they all rushed towards the main exit, flinging the double doors wide open, which they had never done before, and ran out.

They ran out. For the first time since we had been imprisoned, the women were alone in the bunker.

For me, the initial shock was soon over. I leapt forward, slid my arm between the bars, finished turning the key and removed it together with the whole bunch. I pushed and the hatch opened. I stepped back, my hands clenched, for I was holding the most precious thing in the world. My internal clock had started up again and I can say that we stood there for more than a minute, staring at the open door, still unable to grasp what had happened. The shock had taken my breath away and I was panting. I got a grip on myself, grabbed the bars and jumped through the hatch to unlock the door of the cage. There were several keys on the key-ring, I had to try two before finding the right

one, and as I had never used a key before, I fumbled, but I opened the cage door. The women watched me, rooted to the spot in amazement. They looked as though they did not understand what was happening.

"Come," I cried, "come out, come!"

Then I ran to the other door. I had no idea what I would find there. It was only a few paces away, which made me wonder whether I would run into the guards, whether I wasn't rushing headlong into danger, but I told myself that the women would come to the rescue if necessary and that forty angry women would be more than a match for a few guards, even if they were armed. I went through the open door, and found myself in a wide corridor which was deserted. On either side were doors that opened into rooms which I knew nothing about.

The first woman to join me was Anthea, and just behind her, Dorothy, the one who had questioned me. They both wore the same expression of disbelief. They spoke, but their words were drowned by the continuous wail of the siren, and I could not understand them. I realised that I was talking too, I said that the guards were no longer there, that they had left, that they had run away, and things like that, I kept repeating the same thing over and over, like an unbelievable truth that had to be stated again and again to convince myself. We persevered with our futile conversation for a few seconds, then the siren suddenly stopped, as if stifled by its own noise.

"They've gone," I said.

Dorothy nodded. Anthea echoed:

"They've gone."

We were so disconcerted that we just stood there, utterly at a loss. The other women appeared, one at a time,

hesitantly, then, as they reassured each other, they began pushing and shoving, thronging the corridor that was too narrow to contain us all. I withdrew, entered one of the rooms, and looked around me. There was a big table, a few chairs and cupboards. Of course, at that point, I did not know the names of all those things, I saw objects that I did not recognise as I threaded my way rapidly between them, for I had glimpsed another door on the far side of the room. It too was open, and led to the staircase.

Today I say staircase as if, at that time, I knew what it was and what I was looking for. In fact, we were not even certain that we were underground, the women thought so because there were no windows. I had never found myself at the foot of a staircase, but I had heard of them and I immediately realised what it was. I ran up a few stairs then turned round to call, unnecessarily, for Anthea and Dorothy had followed me. They were more cautious than I – later they told me they still dreaded the sudden appearance of the guards and that before following me, they had shouted to the women that they might have to fight and the women had replied that they would get themselves killed if necessary, but they would not return to the cage. I was no longer thinking of them. I ran up the stairs recklessly, I ran with a sort of elation that engulfed my entire being, yes! an intoxication akin to that which I could no longer induce by making up stories since I had emerged from my isolation and begun talking to the others, I was carried by an impulse so powerful that had a guard appeared at that moment, even if he were twice my size, I would have knocked him over and trampled him underfoot; I was possessed by a wild joy that was heedless of all else, I climbed without becoming breathless, without

getting tired, I who had never taken more than twenty steps in a straight line, flew up the steps as in those dreams which I had later, but which I had heard the women describing, where you take off, and glide like the birds that I was soon to watch as they were carried by the airstreams, effortlessly drifting, dancing for hours in the twilight as I was dancing up the steps, weightless, floating endlessly, an intoxicating ascent towards the undreamed of, at that moment I knew not what, the outside, the world that was not the cage; and I had no thoughts, only a profound thrill that swept me along, and images, perhaps, that raced through my mind, or simply words that gushed up inside me and rose to receive the imminent images, the sky, the night, the horizon, the sun, the wind, and many more, countless words that had accumulated over the years and which were in a hurry, spurring me forward. Ah! That first time I went up the stairs! When I think of it, my eyes fill with tears, I feel that compelling force like a surge of triumph, I think I would be prepared to re-live twelve years of imprisonment to experience that miraculous ascent, that wonderful certainty that made me so light that I flew up the hundred steps in one go, without stopping for breath, and I was laughing.

Suddenly, I found myself at the top. I was in what we later called a cabin, three walls and a door, also open, the plain spreading out before me. I bounded forward, I looked, it was the world.

It was daylight. The sky was grey, but it was not the lifeless grey of the bunker walls. Huge masses of subtle hues glided gently in a light breeze. I recognised them as clouds; they were tinged with pearl, lit from behind by the sun. A strange emotion choked me, different from the exuberance

that had borne me up the stairs, more restrained and exquisite. I would have liked to linger, but there were too many other things to discover. It was drizzling. Fate would have us emerge on a rainy day. Later, we realised that rain was rare in this season. I stepped forward, raised my face and arms to this extraordinary wetness, which I had heard about, but had not been able to imagine. A few drops fell on my hands and I licked them, enthralled. My dress was soon soaked through and the breeze, light as it was, plastered it to my thighs, and I found that wonderful.

"But where are we?" said a voice behind me.

It was a breathless Dorothy, supported by Anthea. They both looked all about us, and I did likewise: all we could see was the gently undulating plain stretching as far as the eye could see, from one end of the horizon to the other.

"We're outside," I replied, laughing, "and there isn't a single guard. They've all gone."

"We're a long way from a town, there isn't even the slightest sign of housing. I always thought we must be near some big city," said Anthea.

Dorothy frowned.

"I've never seen anything like it. This plain is vast, it's unbroken. We are not in my country, you could always see mountains."

Anthea seemed so puzzled and anxious, that I felt sorry for her.

"What does it matter?" I said. "The main thing is that we're outside, free, and that there are no guards."

The other women began to arrive, out of breath, stumbling a little, and we moved away from the cabin to make room. Soon, they were all there, looking around them in amazement, trying to find out where they were,

repeating, one after the other, that they had never seen anything like it, almost terrified at being in such a strange place. I did not understand why they did not rejoice wholeheartedly at the miracle of being outside, released from the cage, at seeing the sky and feeling the wind and the rain. They had wanted something all their lives, but now that they had it, they did not recognise it. Perhaps, when someone has experienced a day-to-day life that makes sense, they can never become accustomed to strangeness. It is the kind of thing that I, who have only experienced absurdity, can only suppose.

"I'm frightened," said Annabel.

They huddled together, a small, terrified group in the middle of an unknown land. After the familiarity of the cage, the forty women clung to each other, disoriented before the vast stillness from which nothing emanated.

"Supposing they come back?"

I realised that they were trying to justify the fear they felt. They cast around, all we could see was the stony plain where all that moved was the sparse grass gently swaying in the breeze.

"We mustn't stay here, we must leave, hide," Annabel went on.

"Go where?" murmured Frances. "There's nothing. Not a building, not a shelter, not a road, just . . . "

She looked at the small building from which we had emerged:

"Just this sort of cabin, in the middle of nowhere."

"We're lost," said another.

There was a murmur of unfinished phrases, one picking up from where another tailed off, colliding and tumbling over each other. I suddenly lost my temper.

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"Then go back inside! The cage is still down there, if you're so frightened of being outside!"

"Oh, you and your . . ." retorted Annabel, exasperated.

She stopped short. I think she was going to say insolence, or rebelliousness, but she quickly realised that I was right, that this panicking would get them nowhere. I tried to control myself too, for I sensed that an argument was in the air, and that would have given them an outlet for their anxiety and set them all against me. Anthea, who had remained calm, backed me up.

"The child's right. We must think, and organise ourselves. I don't understand where the guards have gone, or why they have disappeared, and I'm frightened too. It's not long since they left the bunker and there's no trace of them."

"Eleven minutes," I added, "since the siren went off, and perhaps a little longer, for I lost track of time for a moment. It took us eleven minutes to open the door, get out and climb up the stairs."

"Eleven minutes? With a helicopter or small aircraft, that's plenty of time for them to vanish from sight, I suppose. But what about us? We can't disappear like that. To get over there, to the horizon, it will take us a good two or three hours on foot. If they're planning to come back and catch us, we'll be captured in no time."

"Not me," said Annabel. "I'd rather die, I won't go back. They can drug me as much as they like, I'm sure I could turn the most carefully dosed drug into a lethal poison."

"Same here," said Greta. "I'll stop breathing. It must be a matter of willpower, I'm sure you can stop your heart beating."

These words hardened their resolve, they began to say: "me too", "me too". Rebellion was stirring, it was plain

that, this time, they would not be caught unawares, as must have happened in the past, that they would not allow themselves to be overtaken by events like terrified creatures that could be led to the slaughterhouse, for they could not conceive of the slaughterhouse. They straightened up and looked about them at the strange landscape, they planted their feet more firmly on the ground, there were smiles.

"It's raining," said Frances.

She held out her hands to collect the raindrops as I had done and raised them to her lips. Then she felt her hair and cheeks:

"I'm soaking wet. I had forgotten what it's like. It's such a long time . . . "

"More than twelve years," said Greta, "just look how the child has grown."

They turned to me, their clock, and stared at me in silence for a long time, then they spread out a little. They bent down and touched the ground. Some of them picked up the stones to reveal dry, grey soil, for the rain had not soaked through. Annabel moistened her index finger with saliva and held it up to see which way the wind was blowing.

"The clouds are light. It must be the middle of the day, you can see the sun is high. If it is going in the usual direction, the wind is coming from the west."

"Of course, because it's raining. Westerlies always bring rain."

"In your country, maybe, but we're not in your country."

"Oh no! There would be hills and forests!"

That made them laugh. They needed to relieve the tension.

"It's odd, there aren't any birds. Do the birds shelter when it rains?" asked Greta who had only lived in the city.

"But where would they shelter? There isn't a single tree in sight, only a few shrubs."

"And stones," said Dorothy. "You couldn't grow anything here. I've never seen such poor soil."

"Anyway, we haven't got anything to grow."

That short phrase hung in the air for a second, as if minds were grasping it, probing it and then setting it aside for later. But it left an echo:

"We must prepare some food," said Greta. "It's time to eat, and I'm hungry. It's funny, down there, I never felt hungry."

The food was in the bunker, on the trolley. A shudder rippled through the women at the thought that, if we wanted to eat, we had to go back down.

"How are we going to cook it? I don't see how we can cook!"

"What does it matter, we have to eat, even if the meat is raw!"

"I won't go down there. I'd rather die of hunger," announced Annabel.

Once again, they drew together, shoulder to shoulder, seeking comfort in the contact, I suppose. Someone had to go, and, of course, it was me. Probably because I remembered no other world than that of the prison, I was the least afraid. When they huddled together, I did not join in, and so I stood aloof, and their eyes turned to me. I understood, and smiled at them:

"Of course," I said, "I'll go."

I lost no time, and made my way immediately towards the cabin. They followed a few paces behind, as if to give me their support in doing what they would have been so

afraid to do, and I was glad because I balked when I reached the staircase. Supposing the guards came back? Would the women be able to fight? For a moment I pictured an appalling massacre, I imagined myself coming back up to find a heap of corpses and the sniggering guards waiting for me, weapon in hand. I stiffened, because I did not want to be a coward, and set off down the stairs. Since then, I have gone back down hundreds of times – that is one of the few things I have not counted – and every time it is just as unpleasant, as if I were walking into a trap that could close any minute. When I was alone, I got into the habit of fastening the door of the cabin with a few stones: it was ludicrous, the locks were rusty and the bolts were stuck, and the wind was never strong enough to move the heavy wooden door, but I felt easier.

I rushed down the hundred steps as fast as I could, taking great care for I had never descended a staircase before and I was afraid of falling, then I ran along the corridor to find myself faced with the problem of carrying the huge pots, the carrots, the meat, and also the water. I realised that it would require several trips and that it was probably more than I could manage. Half an hour earlier, I had been so excited that I had rushed up without feeling in the least tired, but now I was short of breath, my head was spinning and my legs were trembling. I told myself that I would have to make one trip anyway and heaped the meat into a pot. I was half-way up when I met Anthea on her way down.

"I didn't think you'd manage all on your own."

"You're right, it's too much. Besides, we only thought of the pots and the vegetables, but we also need water, to drink and for cooking, and the plates."

"What's more, we have to make a fire. Up there, they're gathering a few stones and twigs, but how will we light it?"

We decided that we would take up the things I had already assembled and then we would explore the rooms.

Later, we thought a great deal about what we had found, but once again, we never came up with a coherent explanation. There was no bedroom for the guards, nor was there a bed, which Anthea found astonishing: so they didn't sleep here? Did they leave every evening and come back in the morning? Where did they go?

"They vanished in eleven minutes," murmured Anthea, "and we have found no trace of them. I'm not sure an ordinary helicopter can go that fast."

The drawers contained various tools: hammers, nails, screwdrivers, all things which I had to learn to use, as well as knives and hatchets that we were to find extremely useful. Anthea was thrilled to find four big rucksacks and she explained what they were used for. Then I showed her a pile of little boxes: they were matches which solved the problem of how to light a fire. But, most importantly, we discovered vast stores of food. First it was stacks of cans that made Anthea shout for joy, she read the labels and recited the names of the dishes with an enthusiasm that made me laugh: sauerkraut, baked beans, pâté and vegetables that I had never tasted. Then we opened the door of a cold store full of frozen meat and poultry, as well as sacks of carrots, leeks, celery and turnips. So we would have no trouble surviving.

"I can't work out how long all this will last, but even with forty of us, it looks to me as if there's enough to keep us going for years."

She named everything she saw and my head was soon in a whirl from all I had learned. I think she would have gone on exploring for hours, but I told her we had to get back to the others, who were waiting for us. We went back up with meat, cans, lots of potatoes and matches. The women kindled the twigs piled between large stones:

"Dorothy was sure that you'd find matches," said Greta. "Men always have matches."

We went back down to fetch some water. This time, two of the stronger women came with us.

The rain had stopped and the clouds dispersed while the food was cooking: the sun came out, high in the sky, which meant, so they said, that it was the middle of the day. We ate that first meal sitting in little groups around the fire, whereas, in the cell, each woman used to take her food and sit anywhere. There was plenty of food and for the first time, there was some left over in the pots, which made them joke:

"We'll get fat!"

"After dieting so strictly for years, we'll lose the benefit!"

It was only much later that they explained to me why they found that so funny. Strangely, these women who laughed so readily had not joked since we had escaped. I was always solemn, and had not changed. I suppose they had been overwhelmed by the successive shocks.

"What time is it?" Greta asked me.

And I was astonished to hear myself answer that it was ten o'clock at night. It was just over three hours since the siren had gone off, and at that moment, we had not been up for long. So it was true that we had not been following the usual pattern of day and night.

"You'd better put your watch right," laughed Anthea.

"How do I know where to start?"

"We'll watch the sunset this evening: take that as your starting point and tell us how many hours have gone by at sunset tomorrow. From one sunset to another is a whole day, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Dorothy. "Doesn't it depend on the time of year?"

They launched into a confused argument which went completely over my head. The days got longer in summer, shorter in winter, but from one sunset to another was always twenty-four hours, wasn't it? None of them was completely sure, not even Anthea who was the cleverest. I soon stopped listening to them. Anyway, sooner or later, night would fall: where were we going to spend it?

Of course, there was no question of going back and sleeping in the prison and the thought of staying close to the cabin was not very appealing. I had watched the sun's progress, and it seemed to me as if we had a few hours until dark. I suggested going down to fetch food and blankets, and then moving away. But in which direction? Supposing the guards came back? How could we predict where they would come from, when there was no sign of any road? Besides, how had they left? Anthea said there were no beds in the rooms. This provoked a fresh torrent of questions, but Dorothy sensed the impending chaos and reminded the women of what she considered the fundamental question: if we decided to move away, we had to decide which way to go. So how should we decide? Anthea pointed south: in that direction there was a slight dip in the ground that could conceal us.

The women worried a great deal about the return of the guards, but they never came back. It took a long time for

them to shake off their fear, and I did not really understand why they were not reassured sooner. The guards had disappeared in moments, leaving no trace, as if they had evaporated. They had appeared from nowhere and now they had gone back there and I was less surprised than the others, who had lived in a world where things made sense. But I had only known the absurd, and I think that made me profoundly different from them, as I gradually began to realise. We were free.

In fact, we had merely moved to a new prison.

Anthea and I made several trips down to fetch everything we needed. The women waited for us outside the cabin and relieved us of our load, then we went straight back down again. The third time, they grabbed us, pleased and excited.

"Come and see! Come and see! Look what we've made!"

A few paces from where we had sat to eat was a clump of bushes, not very thick, but fairly high. They had pulled up the bushes in the centre, scratching their hands, and had thrown blankets over the sides. We had brought up two shovels, which they had used to dig a hole. I did not understand.

"Here's the toilet," they announced triumphantly.

"We're human again," declared Dorothy. "We can do our business in private, sheltered from view."

I was used to the toilet in the prison, and I did not immediately understand Anthea's delight. There were tears in her eyes. She went over to the makeshift construction, stopped, smiled and asked:

"Is anyone in there?"

They all laughed.

"No, it's free, you can go."

"This way," said one of the women raising a blanket to reveal the entrance.

Anthea went in, lowered the blanket behind her and remained there for a moment. When she reappeared, she told me it was my turn.

The women's complaints about having to defecate in public had taught me a lot, and I finally appreciated the importance of the occasion. I sensed I was being invited to participate in the life of the past, in that world which they spoke of together and which, now, I knew, they no longer intended to exclude me from, even though I already knew that I would never be able to enter it. And so I walked towards the little area staked out by blankets. They watched me with bated breath, I could see they were giving me something very precious, and my lack of enthusiasm bothered me. I drew aside the coarse stiff fabric, went through, let it fall back into place and was immediately assailed by a curious impression of strangeness. My heart thumped, I felt light-headed. I glanced around: I could only see the thorny branches and the folds of the brownish blankets which created a screen between the others and myself. I shivered. But I soon understood: it was the first time that I had found myself alone, that no woman could see me, and I could not see any of them. I found that profoundly disturbing. I stood there at a loss, contemplating my situation. I discovered physical solitude, something so ordinary for everybody else but which I had never experienced. It immediately appealed to me.

Luckily.

I used the hole, but I felt uneasy, for I had to stand up with my legs apart, my body half bent over, in an unfamiliar position that I found extremely uncomfortable.

I was glad nobody could see me in such a pose, whereas I had never been embarrassed at defecating in front of everybody, happily perched on the toilet seat. Afterwards, I picked up the shovel to cover my faeces, as I had been told to do, but I was troubled by the lack of water to wash with and hoped I hadn't soiled myself. Then I came out. Later, Anthea taught me how to use a few leaves.

Greta and Frances overcame their aversion to going back down into the bunker and came with us on several trips while the women prepared the bundles. Each of us had knotted the corners of her blanket to make a sort of bag which contained cans of food, meat and various things we thought would come in handy. We set off. The three big pots full of water were each carried by two women and we decided to take it in turns, changing over often to ensure they did not get tired and trip up, spilling the lot. It took us more than an hour to get ready. When we left, the sun seemed to be three-quarters of the way across the sky, and we hoped we would have time to reach the slight dip before dark.

Anthea, the two women who had helped us and I were very tired. We had gone up and down the stairs more than ten times after years when we had not walked more than ten metres in a straight line, and even then, in measured steps, for the guards would not allow us to run. The others realised, and helped carry some of our load. When Dorothy noticed I was stumbling, she asked if someone would carry my bundle. Afterwards, that never happened to me again, I soon became the strongest, probably because I was the youngest. Anyway, I was the one who found it easiest to become acclimatised, probably because I had not known anything else and was not riddled with regrets.

Our progress was soon impeded: we were wearing open sandals and were walking over stones which found their way through the holes and hurt our feet. We limped, some of the women tried to go barefoot, but saw that they might graze themselves. It was Laura who thought of tearing a few strips of fabric from her dress and wrapping them round her feet. Soon we had all done likewise.

At the top of the hill we stopped to look back. There was no movement in this vast, arid landscape. We set off again, glancing back frequently, and as soon as the cabin was out of sight, we wanted to stop, but Greta, who has particularly sharp eyes, said that she thought there was water down below because she thought she could see the reflections shimmering among the bushes. I had walked with my nose to the ground, constantly trying not to injure myself despite the makeshift socks. I looked up, but even if I was later to realise that I had excellent eyesight, I had no idea what a river running through shrubs might look like. The prospect of water boosted everyone's morale and we decided to go on. Greta had not been mistaken, and half an hour later we set down our bundles, removed our dresses and ran towards the cool, shallow water.

I loved my first bath so much that I thought I would never want to get out. I lay on the bed of the stream, my hair floating in the water, for a long time. I would have fallen asleep if I had not begun to feel cold after a while.

We thought we were too tired to feel hungry, but once we had bathed and rested, we did light a fire. The wood burned quickly, soon there were embers and the women made a sort of mesh from wire on which to grill the meat. For the first time, I ate something that had not been

boiled. It tasted delicious, I felt as though I never wanted to stop eating. In fact, I think I fell asleep with my mouth full!

I awoke in the middle of the night. I was amazed: it was dark! With my eyes wide open, I could barely see my own hands. The sky was a dark mass and rather frightening, as if it might collapse, and it took me ages to realise that once again it was very overcast.

I felt oppressed and tried to reassure myself by remembering what the women had told me about the stars, which are so far away, the constellations and the galaxies. But then another worry assailed me, the sense of an infinite void, vertigo and the fear of falling in this strange darkness, spinning endlessly in nothing. I curled up into a ball as if to protect myself, and realised that I was lying close to another woman, that I was touching her. That made me jump, I instinctively moved away, because of the whip, then I remembered that there were no more guards. All the same, I did not like the contact with another human body and I gently moved away. I have never re-experienced the impulse which had flung me into Frances' arms that night. Someone had thrown a blanket over me, and I found that strange and touching.

I lay still among the women, my companions in life, who were asleep all around me. A light breeze made the leaves rustle, and I listened to this new sound. I was in a different world, and everything was unfamiliar; since that morning, I had been learning all the time. A wave of happiness surged through me: whatever happened, I had left the bunker, and, like the others, I knew that I would die rather than go back there. Already, I no longer understood how I had been able to bear living there. I told

myself that if it had not killed them, it was because you cannot die of sorrow.

I saw the sun rise. The sky grew paler as I watched, the clouds dispersed and it became light, first grey, then golden as the sun climbed higher. I heard birds singing, and I saw some flying high in the sky. Gradually, the women awoke. They looked surprised, as if the night had made them forget that they had escaped, then they laughed and hailed each other. We went down to the river to wash and, on exploring further, we came across a place deep enough to swim. Anthea held me in the water, she wanted to teach me breast-stroke, but I was terrified, I could not follow her instructions, I grazed my knees on the stones. But still, I did manage to float and found it delightful to let myself drift along with the gentle current. Then we ate the contents of a few cans of food. The women made a fire and managed to collect lots of hot embers, over which they set the potatoes to boil. We spent most of that first day in this way, eating for pleasure and returning to the river to bathe, time and time again, lazing around in the sun, which was not too fierce. However, we were still haunted by the fear of the guards, and we decided that two or three of us would keep a constant watch on the cabin from the top of the hill. When it was my turn, I said that I did not need company, I sensed that I would enjoy being on my own.

That evening, the questions began to rear their heads again: where were we? What were we going to do?

Was this Earth?

They asked me how long it had been from one sunset to the next: by my clock it had been just over twenty-two and a half hours. It was clear that that did not prove a thing, because we had no idea what my heartbeat actually

was. None of the women had ever seen such a wilderness of stones in such a mild climate, but they all admitted that they had not travelled much and that in their past life, they had not bothered much with geography. Their knowledge was confined to their immediate surroundings and a few local walks near their home towns. Naturally, they had seen films set in countries they had never visited, but the Earth was so vast! But it did seem odd that the vegetation was so sparse: a few clumps of small trees which looked familiar, they looked like holm oak, boxtree and larch, but oh dear! they found it so hard to remember, and an unusual grass. There were no wild flowers, which did not mean anything, as it might not have been the right season. They were struck by the absence of insects but were unable to deduce much from this. The terrain rolled towards the horizon in long sweeping undulations but it would be exaggerating to describe it as hilly. But how could we cope with the idea that we were not on Earth?

"We must look for a town," they decided.

But supposing the towns belonged to the guards? Supposing we were recaptured? There were countless arguments, which proved vain, for in fact we never did find any towns. We were in no hurry to move: the joy of being in the open air, of bathing in the river and of eating as much as we wanted made us lazy, and several days were spent in idle discussions which the various pleasures soon interrupted.

I no longer felt the furious hostility of before, my anger had subsided. No longer seething with hatred and trying to find fault with my companions, I realised that it was difficult for them to pursue a train of thought for long, or to follow an argument through to its conclusion. Anthea

was the only one who had the ability to do this. Some of the things she said made me realise that their inability to think clearly was the result of having been drugged for a long time and that perhaps I myself could have been a bit cleverer and thought harder than I did when, later, I found myself alone. For instance, it did not occur to me, after finding the road, to follow it in both directions. I only thought of that recently, now that I am no longer able to do so. What is more, they were not very well educated: they were women who, before these mysterious events, had run their homes and raised their children or, if they worked, were shop assistants, waitresses and checkout girls – jobs that were explained to me gradually. Only Anthea had studied: having been a typist for a few years, she went back to college to become a nurse and had just qualified before we were imprisoned. She had forgotten a lot. The other women lacked foresight and were disorganised, they quickly became routine-bound, they had never developed skills they had not needed. On the whole, that did not change, for Dorothy, Anthea and I soon took responsibility for our life.

I had detested Dorothy because she had assumed power purely because of her age, but I began to respect her when I saw that she was the first to think about vital matters. Each time the women embarked on a discussion and then lost track, Dorothy would tactfully interrupt them and make a useful suggestion. I saw that her authority came from her wisdom, but I was not inclined to wait for her orders, I preferred to do as she did and think ahead. After a few days, we realised that we had used up half our provisions.

"We must go back and get some more food," she said,

"and make a list of what is down there. After that, we will decide whether to stay here or leave."

In her mind, that "we" still only meant Anthea and her, but I knew it would soon include me.

About fifteen of the women came with Anthea and me. They were not going to go down into the bunker, but would help carry everything we brought up. It was also suggested they should keep a lookout, which I thought was pointless. I said so to Anthea.

"Maybe you're right," she replied, "but I'll feel happier too if there's someone keeping watch at the top. You never know. We don't have a clue as to why they left, or how, so we can't be certain they won't come back."

That made sense. It is impossible to foretell what might happen in a world where you do not know the rules.

So we retraced our steps back to the cabin and, as we drew closer, we fell silent. I had never been very talkative, but I was used to living amidst a steady drone of chatter, and now all that could be heard was the crunching of the stones beneath our feet.

"If we're going to walk, we'll need better shoes," observed Anthea. "These sandals won't last two days."

In our haste to leave, nobody had paid attention to the rooms we had rushed through, but I seemed to recall seeing boots rather like the ones the guards wore.

"The thing is there are forty of us!" exclaimed Greta.

"When you go barefoot, the soles harden, perhaps we should . . . "

But she did not finish her sentence and nobody started on the usual speculation. We were getting nearer, and a certain anxiety made us silent. We unwittingly slowed our pace.

"Nothing's changed," said Annabel, as we reached the cabin.

There was a gentle wind. If we stopped talking and kept still, it whispered the same song in our ears. That day, the clouds were back, the sky was high and white. I saw that my companions were shivering.

"Let's go," I urged.

We had been in the open air, and I recoiled in disgust: when we were two thirds of the way down, the smell hit me. Anthea explained:

"That's our own smell that has lingered. You've already forgotten it. The ventilation system provides air that is breathable, and that's about all."

Then I heard it: it was the same buzzing noise that I had heard all my life and I realised that, since I had been outside, I had been vaguely perturbed by its absence.

"And the lights have stayed on," I noted, "that's odd. Shouldn't everything have been switched off, stopped?"

"In this world, how can we tell what's normal? Just as well, anyway! We hadn't thought of that."

The lights never did go out.

Neither of us wanted to enter the big room that housed the cage. But we forced ourselves to, before we did anything else, so as not to spoil the pleasure of exploring. The last traces of apprehension vanished when we saw that everything was exactly as we had left it. We hoped to take the mattresses, because we had slept on the ground, levelled with the shovel, joking that we had lost the only comfort the prison had had to offer.

"They would be too heavy," I protested. "I don't see how we could carry them, if we leave. We can take them up, but we can only use them if we decide to stay put."

"Which would be ridiculous. We must look for civilisation."

"What civilisation?"

Anthea looked at me.

"What do you mean?"

I shrugged.

"Just think about it. This planet belongs to them, so what would we find other than the people who had us imprisoned? I have no wish to meet them."

"You think we're on another planet?"

It was not a question, it was a statement. I was not entirely convinced of what I was saying. I never found out for certain either.

Then we went into the room off to the right, the one that contained a table and a few chairs. Along the wall were six tall, narrow cupboards which Anthea told me were called lockers and were always found in workplaces for people to keep their things in. They were open. In each one, we found two pairs of boots, and I could not remember if these were the ones I had seen. Anthea took them out and placed them on the table. There were also two shirts, two pairs of underpants and two pairs of trousers.

"These could come in very useful. But there aren't enough."

A drawer contained needles and thread, as well as other objects that I was unable to identify.

"Scissors, buttons and zips: for repairing their uniforms," said Anthea.

That was all, which she found puzzling.

"No photos, or letters, no personal belongings, but it's true, they didn't live here. They probably kept all that

somewhere else. They left in such a hurry, they didn't have time to gather their things."

She broke off, frowning.

"What's the matter?"

"But if they didn't live here, why the shirts and the boots?"

She shrugged.

We crossed the room where the cans of food were stored to get to the cold store on the other side. Anthea stopped to check the thermometer on the door.

"Minus fifty! This was meant to last for a very long time. Maybe fresh supplies didn't arrive all that often."

We quickly took what we needed. I was very cold, a sensation that was completely new to me and which I found painful. Seeing me shiver, Anthea went to fetch a blanket and wrapped me in it.

"You must take care not to fall ill. I don't know what I'd do to make you better, I haven't seen anything that looks like medicines yet. And yet they were always giving us pills! Sit down and rest, I'm going to heat up some water."

In the other room, we had seen a small stove and saucepan much smaller than the ones we used. Anthea looked for something to flavour the drink she intended to make me and was surprised to find only a few tea leaves in the bottom of a packet. I did not like this new taste much, but I drank it obediently and it warmed me up.

Then we went back to the first room. Anthea started looking for some coffee, or more packets of tea, but found nothing. I was not much help because I could not read, and the labels told me nothing. There were a lot of tools, in that department we never lacked for anything, other than understanding why they were stored there. I have

already mentioned the hammer and nails, but there were also saws, planes, all sorts of pliers, picks, shovels and several tin-openers. Anthea identified other objects whose name and use escape me as I never had the occasion to use them.

We took the saws and the shovels. We discovered a huge store of blankets similar to the ones we had been given, but new. They were probably being kept until they were needed.

"At the rate we got through them, there are enough there for two hundred years!" exclaimed Anthea.

We used them to bundle up the things we were going to take up to the top.

"We won't be able to carry all that, there's too much and we are too weak after all those years doing almost nothing."

The hundred stairs were daunting enough, but how would we climb them with such a load?

"We could use the trolley," I suggested, "if we can get it up the stairs."

It was heavy and wide. As the staircase was straight, we would not get stuck, but the weight made us dubious.

"Let's try."

After ten steps, we were out of breath. We had to lift it completely if we did not want to damage the wheels, which would have defeated the object.

"Greta's brave and strong. If she came down and helped us, we could manage it."

We called up, for we were certain the women were waiting for us beside the entrance. Greta willingly joined us. Our progress was slow and we had to stop frequently so as not to exhaust ourselves. When Frances and Annabel saw how tired we were, they overcame their qualms and

went down to fetch the bundles we had prepared. We took enough meat for just two days, as we only had to come back to get fresh supplies, and we left the mattresses behind because they were too heavy. I carefully shut the door of the cold store behind me and, at the last minute, I picked up a chair for Dorothy.

The return was very slow. We had to clear a path for the trolley and, in fact, we found we were making a little road. Annabel went on ahead to request some extra help.

"But this road will tell them where we are!" complained one of the women.

Anthea and Greta shrugged. Gradually, all the women who dared go down concluded that they would never come back. There was something so final, such a total absence of any trace of them in the abandoned rooms, that it was impossible to imagine that someone would come and say: "This is mine."

We quickly organised ourselves into teams: some women went on ahead and removed the stones, the others followed, scraping the ground with a shovel. At the slightest obstruction, we halted the trolley to clear the way. As it was heavily laden, it took several of us to get it moving again. When we arrived, the fires were burning, and grilled meat awaited us. Dorothy ate sitting on her chair, and we gathered round her.

"We have to leave," she said. "We can't settle here and live from the bunker like parasites. We must remain human beings. I want to know where we are, who imprisoned us and why. I do not want to die sitting on a chair, in the middle of I don't know what."

Curiously, she had just described her fate.

"We have blankets and lots of thread: we'll make

rucksacks, and each woman will carry as much as she can. It doesn't matter whether we go north or south, since we don't know which way whatever we are seeking lies."

"Nor whether we'll be glad to find it," muttered Anthea.

"Greta, Anthea and the child will go back down into the bunker to get cans. We must assess the weight of what we eat each day and see whether one woman is capable of carrying two months' food. We will walk. We'll build up our stamina, and after a while we'll be able to do twelve to fifteen miles a day, which means six to nine hundred miles altogether: in that time we're bound to find something. Otherwise . . . "

She shivered. There was a moment's silence, which was broken by Anthea:

"If we take two months' provisions, we'll only be able to walk for one month. We have to think of the return."

We remained silent. Nobody wanted to believe that we would find nothing. But at night, there were no lights. In the past, there were always signs of human existence – roads, planes – even over deserts. This empty plain and silent sky gave the impression of an uninhabited land.

"We will leave in two days' time. Tomorrow, we'll make the rucksacks."

That night, the sky cleared. After sunset, when night had fallen, I gazed at the stars for ages. Anthea lay still on her back, her eyes open.

"Are you awake?"

"I'm not sure this is the sky over Earth. I can't find the Great Bear, which is the only constellation I used to be able to recognise. In the other hemisphere, you could see the Southern Cross, but I don't know what it looked like or where it was."

The next day, we were very busy. There were several trips down into the bunker to stock up on food, we divided the tools, the shovels and the saucepans into forty piles. Ten of the women sewed the rucksacks, making them as sturdy as they could. We wanted to take the trolley, but it would slow us down considerably. When I think back, I cannot see why it seemed so obvious that we had to keep it with us: it was as if we all had a foreboding of what lay in store and were determined to deny it. Anthea particularly wanted to keep the wheels, she gave me some complicated explanation about wheels being the origin of all technical processes. Eventually, she found a way of dismantling it. Everyone took a part of it. We would also take the chair with us.

Because of Dorothy and the other elderly women, Elizabeth and Margaret, our progress was fairly slow. We had to stop every hour for them to rest, and when there was an incline, no matter how gentle, they could never make it to the top in one go. I went on ahead, impatient to find out what was on the other side, and was always disappointed, because there was nothing but the plain, a gentle dip and then the next rise. The women watched me return, hoping that I had seen houses, a road, a sign, but I shook my head. We made our way across three large undulations, and the sun was going down when we saw another river, smaller than the first, and we decided to stop for the night. We quickly set up camp: the hearth made of stones, a hole in the middle of some shrubs for a latrine, and three blankets for privacy. The meal was relatively silent, disappointment already setting in.

"We should have expected it," said Anthea. "They built the prison far from everything, it was probably supposed to remain a secret."

The women immediately seized on this idea. They did not want to be sad, and soon found a way of embarking on a new discussion on the old theme of our imprisonment. After a while, they even began laughing again. When the sun went down, Rose began to sing.

I was amazed. I had never heard music before, I was barely aware of its existence. "Look," Annabel had exclaimed, "how beautiful the sky is!", and everyone turned to watch the sunset. The few cries of delight soon died away confronted with the unexpected splendour of the colours. I did not recognise them, I had never seen these shades of pink and mauve, I had only seen the grey of the bunker. Long trails of purple tinged with violet. . . some clouds had a greenish hue, shot through with golden light. It took my breath away and I was about to question Anthea when Rose's voice soared up, clear and strong, amid the silence. I felt a sort of tremor, like a distant echo of the eruption, but it lasted longer and brought tears to my eyes. She sang for a long time, and the other women mouthed the words. The sun disappeared in a sort of long, gentle ovation and dusk settled over the plain.

Later, in my sleep, I felt arms lift me: it was Anthea wrapping me in a blanket. This time, I did not instinctively recoil at the memory of the guards and the whip, but I did not go back to sleep. I felt a vague sense of unease. I was distracted by the stars, which fascinated me. I gazed at them for a long time, they seemed fixed, and yet they moved, so slowly that I could not follow their path. Rose's song still rang in my ears.

After a while, I went to the toilet. On my way back, I noticed that some of the women were lying in twos, away from the group, entwined under the same blanket. I found

that strange. When I had the opportunity to talk to Anthea about it, she shrugged and told me they gave each other what they could. I did not insist, for I sensed she was embarrassed.

We walked for twenty-six days, and every evening there was the sadness and then Rose's singing. She never repeated the same song twice. At first, she sang tunes that she had learned before, then she began to make songs up, developing a talent that she did not know she had. On the twenty-seventh day, when we stopped for lunch, I went on ahead as usual while the women prepared the food, and for the first time I saw something: in the middle of the long slope we would be heading down after the meal stood a small, square building that looked so much like the cabin we had left that at first I thought we had gone round in a circle. But the lie of the land was not the same, this cabin was not in the middle of the plain and it was not facing south like ours, the gaping door was facing me. I dashed forward and then realised that I ought to tell the others. So I went back, gesticulating madly, and they abandoned the fires and saucepans to come and join me. I forced myself to wait for them. I too had become a good companion.

They came running up, even Dorothy hurried, breathless as she was. Anthea and I supported her all the way down the hill, and I was glad that this task helped me control my impatience. We stood around the half-open door for a moment, dumbfounded, terrified: supposing there were guards? I stepped forward and pulled the door towards me. The hinges were already rusty, they were stiff, I pushed harder and they gave way, squeaking. I saw the stairway, the light was on. There was an unpleasant smell. I went in, with Anthea and Dorothy at my heels, and

we started to make our way down. Nobody spoke, as if a premonition of what we were going to find was beginning to weigh on us.

The smell soon grew stronger and we were not even half-way down the stairs before it became overpowering. The bravest women were just behind us, and we could hear them exclaiming. Dorothy stopped, tore off the bottom of her dress and made a sort of mask which she held in front of her nose. Everybody did likewise: it hardly lessened the smell but we felt protected from it. We continued our descent, breathing as little as possible, pausing to avoid panting. One by one, the women had fallen silent, and the only sound was the soft clatter of our feet on the stairs. We reached the bottom. The huge double wooden doors were open, as in our own prison the day the siren went off. I stepped inside and stopped dead, petrified with horror.

It was the half-light of night-time, but I could see the cage: the floor was strewn with dead women. They seemed to be everywhere, lying across the mattresses, flung on top of each other, groups of them gripping the bars, in heaps, scattered in an appalling chaos. Some were naked, the dresses of others were in tatters, they were in frightful attitudes, tormented, their mouths and eyes open, their fists clenched as if they had fought and killed each other in the madness from which death had snatched them.

Here, the siren had gone off in the middle of the artificial night, the door was locked and the guards – of course! – had not bothered to open it. The women had tried. They had died of grief, long before hunger had killed them. Without food, furious and desperate, how many days had they spent clawing at the bars with their remaining

strength, trying to prise open the lock without keys or tools, their fingers bleeding, trying to achieve the impossible, sick, going crazy, lying down exhausted and then getting up again to attack the steel with their bare hands, screaming, crying, dazed, sometimes recovering their wits to contemplate their fate and flee it in fury, and now they stank, distended, putrid and green, infested with maggots that swarmed over their decaying bodies, a grotesque image of the fate which could have been ours, had it not been for an incredible stroke of luck.

Our companions joined us, the first with hasty steps, then drawing slowly to a halt. Anthea, Dorothy and I were gradually pushed back and we found ourselves lined up against the walls of the bunker, as far as possible from the cage, forty live women staring at the forty dead women. We stood there for a long time, frozen with horror, then Dorothy kneeled down and I heard her speaking softly: "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us poor sinners . . ."

Later, she told us that she had dredged this up from her childhood, when her grandmother had taught her the Christian prayers without her parents knowing.

The other women also kneeled down and echoed her words, as if, in the face of horror, ancient rituals regained their meaning. The muted drone of jumbled words rose above the terrible jumble of corpses, then Rose's voice could be heard. She sang, and at once her rich powerful soprano filled the air. I did not understand the words, but the tone was so slow, sad and profound that horror turned into grief and I felt my heart contract. When she stopped, we remained silent, then we left noiselessly, one at a time, and very slowly made our way back up.

That evening, Anthea explained that she had sung the

prayer for the dead, in Latin, a language that had been dead for so long that it was only used for ceremonies. I did not understand, I have still not really understood what a ceremony is, but if anyone ever reads these pages, they will know.

That day, we did not move on. Returning to the camp, nobody was able to eat and we sat for hours without speaking. It was not until dusk that we swallowed a little food and began conversing again. So we had not been the only prisoners. There was another bunker, exactly the same as ours. These two facts devastated us. We had no idea what had happened to us: at times it seemed as if our discovery would shed some light on things, but at others it made everything seem even more confusing. Looking back now, I can say that, quite simply, we found ourselves plunged even deeper in the absurd.

I say there were forty of them: we had immediately had the impression that there were as many of them as there were of us, but nobody had counted. I did that the next day, to discover that they were only thirty-nine, and that there were forty mattresses. One of them had probably died before the day the siren went off and her body had been removed. Later, when we discussed it, we continued saying forty, for they were our equals, our less fortunate doubles, and in our minds they were equal in number too. I looked to see whether the bunch of keys had been dropped, we wanted to open the cage to remove the bodies and bury them on the plain, but I found nothing. We tried to force open the bars with the tools we had brought, but either they were very sturdy or none of us knew how to go about it, for we did not succeed. In the end, Anthea and I closed the big double door and that was

the only ceremony we were able to give them. We would have liked to make a tomb, and seal it up, or to leave a message saying that, behind these wooden doors lay forty women who had died for some unknown crazy cause, but we had nothing with which to write and the wood was too hard for us to carve.

We made an inventory of the contents of the two rooms as we had done in the other bunker, and we found the same things, including the boots which was fortunate as our sandals were in a sorry state. Once again we had fresh meat and we stocked up with canned food.

After three days, we set off again. A sort of inertia had taken hold of my companions. They spoke little, the evenings were silent, except when Rose sang, and they joined in. I believe they did not want to think, so as not to have to face the inevitable, and so as not to despair. They thought they would find towns, civilisation: I expected never to encounter anything other than cabins, and I think they sensed it. I did not know the universe they described to me, I could not imagine it and, when after a long uphill climb I saw only another dip, I was not surprised, for I had no clear picture of anything else. But their depressed mood must have affected me, for I lost interest in running on ahead and it was Greta who saw the third cabin. We only hastened our steps a little, restrained by our apprehension and, as we descended, we did not hold out much hope that the cage would be open, that the occupants had managed to escape and that we would meet them one day on the plain: the stench was there.

We were expecting to find women: they were men. They too had attempted to escape. They had tried to loosen one of the sinks, to pull away the pipes to make instruments

with which to prise open the locks. Everything had resisted their efforts: the pipes were twisted but not broken, the porcelain toilet bowls were lopsided, but they had not been able to smash them. The bodies lay scattered everywhere, and were in the same condition as those of the thirty-nine women. The air-conditioning was still working. Gradually the smell would fade and the corpses would still be there, mummified or reduced to skeletons, some naked, the others dressed in rags, shirts torn or trousers cut from the same flimsy cloth as our dresses. They had collapsed all over the place, in all sorts of attitudes, without dignity, tragic witnesses to the incomprehensible. Rose, in tears, refused to come down, and we did not sing the music of the dead. We took everything that might come in useful from the store cupboards and we left immediately, walking for as long as we could, so as not to make our camp near a charnel house.

We continued for months, and from then on it was from charnel house to charnel house. We gave up hope of reaching a town, our expectations had changed: we hoped to find, one day, an open cage. We even decided to leave traces of our visit, to let the others – if there were any – know. In front of the door of each cabin we cleared the ground and drew a big cross, made out of stones. Anthea explained to me that it was the sign of Christianity, the religion of our ancestors, and that a very long time ago, it had been the emblem of the persecuted. Nobody feared the reappearance of the guards any more, we had no idea what had become of them, but we were sure that they were no longer there. We also made an arrow to show which direction we intended to take.

"But supposing there are others wandering around like

us? The cross and the arrow are so obvious that they may well use the same symbols, since they too have only stones to write with! We need a signature," declared Dorothy, "otherwise, we might come across our own signs and not recognise them."

They did not know what to choose. In the previous world, people used to sign their own names, but forty names written in the dust? Thirty-nine, in fact, because we had never known what my name was, and the women called me the child. What should we choose? A circle? A triangle? Two parallel lines? In the end, Anthea suggested a cross with a circle above it.

"That will let them know that we are women. What else do we need?"

"There could be other women," said Greta, "let's add something, and, as we don't know anything, neither where we are, nor why, nor where we're going, let's add a question mark."

Each time it took us a whole day. Several of us returned to the bunker where the men were and drew big symbols on the ground. Our bunker and the first bunker of dead women were not marked, but many others were – not all, as I did not carry on writing the signature on the ground when I was alone, I no longer believed that any living beings would come.

We walked for two years, advancing in small stages, and then we decided we would have to stop: Dorothy was growing feeble. She was aware of it, but had not wanted to mention it. We could see that she was becoming slower and slower. Attempting to get up one morning, she stumbled and it was immediately clear that she could not stand up. Anthea put her ear to her chest: her heart was beating very

feebly. We decided to wait until she was better, but after two days, she became agitated:

"There's no point waiting," she said. "I am old, I must be over seventy-five, my heart won't get any stronger. We must go on."

Thanks to the tools which we had kept with us all this time, we were able to build a kind of stretcher. We felled two trees that were nice and straight, trimmed the trunks and bound the chair to them, using tightly plaited strips of fabric. Dorothy sat on it. As she was very weak and felt cold all the time, we wrapped her in blankets, then we strapped her to the back of the chair and four of us carried her, taking care to walk in step so as not to jolt her. But it only lasted for a few days: she found even this tiring, and then it became painful for her to remain sitting. We nailed branches across the two wooden poles so that we could carry her lying down. She thanked us profusely, and told us that she felt better, but we could see that she was short of breath and while we moved she kept her eyes shut most of the time. At first, she slept, and the slightest thing awoke her, then we realised that she no longer reacted when we stopped to change bearers. Anthea said that she had fallen into a light coma. Some of the women wanted us to stop, but Dorothy woke up and would not hear of it:

"If you stop, I'll say to myself that maybe half an hour later we would have found something, and I'll die angry. I want to keep going until my last breath."

And that was in fact how Dorothy died, gently rocked by the women while Anthea walked beside her holding her hand. After a while, she could no longer feel her pulse. I saw tears trickling down her cheeks.

"It's over," she said.

The others caught up with us and we walked on until sunset, thirty-nine women and a corpse, a long, straggling column crossing the plain, a silent procession through the impossible, unwillingly taking possession of the void, alongside the stubborn woman who had wanted to die without stopping, according to her wish.

We buried her during the night. There was a fine drizzle. Rose's funeral lament lingered over the plain.

We stayed by the tomb for several days, as if we did not want to abandon her and as if we no longer had any reason to continue. I do not think that any one of us still believed in those cities that would be our salvation, or in a bunker where the cage would be open. Nearly every evening, Anthea gazed at the sky, wondering where we were. She said that on Earth, we would have noticed the changing of the seasons, but here, over several months, the days had barely become shorter, and the weather was not noticeably cooler. There would have been snow storms or heat-waves, not this unchanging weather, with hardly any rain and this sparse vegetation. Why move on? We would not be any the wiser as to our whereabouts, she said, we will always be near a bunker and we will die one by one.

From that time on, I was fully aware that one day I would be the last.

But if we did not know where to go, we did not have any better reason for staying, and we set off afresh. So far, we had walked southwards: we decided to change direction. There were still cabins, bunkers and corpses. When Mary-Jane fell ill, we decided to stop. Until she was better, we said, but we knew it was until she died.

I had not had much to do with Mary-Jane, a fairly self-effacing woman who followed without protest and never

made any suggestions. She collected firewood when it was time to build a fire, carried her load without getting breathless, and was neither among the last nor the first when we walked. In fact, she did not stand out in any way: I suppose that is what people mean by easy-going. She was one of the women who did not sleep alone and she was seen a lot with Emma, the first woman who thought that this planet was not Earth. True there were so few of us that we all knew each other, but certain affinities had created loose groups and I was not in the same group as Mary-Jane, but was with Anthea, Greta and Frances, in other words, the group that had formed around Dorothy and which took the decisions. Perhaps that is what they meant by friendship, but in any case, illness brought us all together with the same concern.

Mary-Jane had stomach pains. One day, she lost a lot of blood, whereas she thought she had reached the menopause a long time ago, and then the pains started. That night, she slept little, a spasm of pain awoke her and its suddenness made her cry out. We all went rushing to her side. She immediately got a grip on herself and we heard her groan, her fists in her mouth, her forehead wet with perspiration. We stood beside her, helpless and desperate. At first, she told us to go back to bed, that there was nothing we could do, but none of us was able to and she eventually accepted our presence.

Emma gently dabbed her forehead with a damp cloth, Anthea placed a hot compress on her stomach which Mary-Jane said was soothing. The attack slowly subsided and she fell asleep, exhausted by the pain. Then we lay down on the ground around her and allowed ourselves to go back to sleep. One morning, on waking up, we saw she was no longer with us.

We had stopped fairly close to a cabin so as to have easy access to supplies. We sat there looking at each other in amazement, all seeking her among the others, when it occurred to me to go down into the bunker. There she was. She had torn her blanket into strips which she had tied together, then she had hanged herself from the bars, alongside the forty male corpses. We decided to leave her there. We just cut the rope, laid her out on the floor, carefully wrapped in another blanket, the newest one we had, her hands crossed over her stomach that had hurt her so much, and, for once, Rose agreed to come down and sing in a bunker. Then, we shut the door behind us as we always did. We drew our symbols on the ground and left.

But this time, it was to seek a place to settle down. It was as if these two deaths had convinced us that there was nothing on this planet that was perhaps not Earth. We wanted a river not too far from a bunker that would fulfil our needs: just like the spot we were leaving, but, of course, we did not want to remain so close to the place where one of us had had to kill herself to put an end to her suffering. Dorothy's death had saddened those who loved her, but she had been old and it had been very gentle. Mary-Jane's death had been a shock, it frightened us. The older women did not want to talk about it. That was no doubt why we left almost at once.

After a few weeks, we found what we were looking for: the river was wide, in the middle the water came up to our thighs, and there were plenty of trees on the banks. We decided to build houses with large stones and a kind of mortar made of mud. For the roofs, we would use sawn tree trunks. We had noticed that in certain places where the current was not so strong, there were water weeds

growing. These could be dried and woven together into a rope that we could use to tie together bundles of twigs in a thick layer to make what we called thatch, without being too sure what the word meant. Then we realised that if we mixed these same weeds with the mortar, they made it stronger. We were unpretentious: the sides of the first house were four metres long. It took two months to build and it was very pleasant to shelter inside when it rained. Of course, we could not all fit in at once, but the women who stayed outside huddled together to keep warm, as we had always done since our escape, knowing that next time it rained it would be their turn. The second house did not take us so long. We decided to make it rectangular. The trees were not high and we could not support the whole length of the roof with one beam, but we managed to intersect the trunks so well by supporting them on stone columns that the whole thing held together very well. Also, we knew that there were never any strong winds.

Perhaps it is still standing.

We brought up chairs and tables from the nearby bunker and, accompanied by four of the strongest women, I went to fetch furniture from the others. We also took mattresses. We often found some along the sides of the cages, which we simply had to pull through the bars. We never took mattresses that could not be moved without disturbing the dead. When the mattresses had been aired for a while, the smell vanished and they were perfectly usable. Sometimes we made a discovery: a piece of fabric, a store of thread and a bag of sandals which came in handy as, even though we now all had a pair of boots thanks to our pillaging, when we stopped walking we preferred to wear shoes that did not encase our feet. We had abandoned the trolley

because we knew there was one in all the bunkers and that there were lots of bunkers. We found a new one, dismantled it, brought it back and used it to carry our construction materials from one place to another. Altogether we built five houses, and the first became the kitchen. We installed a chimney for we managed to make a sort of stove: we hammered empty cans flat, then we bent over the edges with pincers to fit them together and then we hammered them down again, thus making a big metal plate which we supported on stone walls. We lit the fire underneath, so that we could heat several saucepans over a single hearth. I became skilled at sawing and could make planks for building shelves to store our food, as well as benches.

I had very much enjoyed building, and I would gladly have carried on, but the other women did not want to: after living forty in a cage, they were happy to be nine or ten to a house. They spoke of the facilities in their previous homes, such as running water and baths: they were things of the past that we would have to forget. I have the impression that they found it easier to adapt to our sedentary life than I did. Sometimes, I would climb a hill and gaze at the plain. I wanted to move on and I became irritable. Then I would think up something to do, an extra table or a bench; the cleverest was a mobile plank system that made it possible to sit on the toilet. I assembled tree trunks sawn in half lengthways to make mobile partitions that could easily be transported, which meant we could do away with the bushes and blankets. It was a long and complicated task which I wanted to accomplish alone, it would have spoilt my fun to have assistance. When I could think of nothing to build, I said that the saws were blunt, that we needed nails or pliers, and I would convince

one of the women to come with me on an excursion of several weeks. On our return, I would come up with a new idea that kept me busy for a while, but it always involved making something or other and we had so few needs that in the end I could think of nothing new. The years passed by, life was pretty monotonous, when a chance conversation with Anthea aroused my desire to learn.

There were only thirty-eight of us now, living in groups in the four houses. We had made what Anthea called bunk beds, so that the mattresses did not take up all the floor space. I lived with Anthea, Greta, Rose, Annabel, Margaret, one of the oldest women and Denise, Laura and Frances. We were all easy-going, realistic and seldom argued. The groups that had formed through natural affinity became more defined when we moved into the houses, which I understood all too well for I would not have wanted to be too close to Carol, who was always excited, or Mary, a sullen woman who was difficult to talk to. I was still puzzled by the couples. Sometimes there were violent arguments, with shouting and crying, and I wondered what could cause so much upset. I had a horror of asking questions, a hangover from my early years, but Anthea realised that I did not understand and she explained to me what women can do together. I found that strange, for I hated anyone touching me, which she put down to the memory of the whip.

"In that case," I replied, "what were men for?"

She was amazed at my ignorance.

"How can I know if no-one tells me? In the bunkers where there were dead men, some of them were naked and I could see that they are made differently from us. I suppose that's got something to do with love. You used to

talk about it but we haven't discussed it for ages, and I'm still none the wiser."

Then she repeated what I had heard so many times before:

"What's the use of telling you? There are no more men."

Anger flared up inside me, but I was no longer a little girl among women: however old I had been at the start, we had been out for seven years now and I was certainly over twenty. I was one of the women who thought, who organised our communal life, I had become skilled, I could saw, nail, sew and weave, I did not want to be treated like a child.

"Because I want to know! Sometimes, you can use what you know, but that's not what counts most. I want to know everything there is to know. Not because it's any use, but for the pleasure of knowing, and now I demand that you teach me everything you know, even if I will never be able to use it. And don't forget, I'm the youngest, one day I'll probably be the last and I might need to know things for reasons which I cannot imagine today."

Then she told me everything, men, the penis, erections, sperm and children. It took some time, for there were so many things to learn, I forgot details and she had to go back over it. I had a very good memory, but Anthea said that even the best memory in the world cannot remember everything at once. She also explained my own body to me. As I did not have periods, I did not know that I had a vagina. She was surprised.

"But you must have realised, felt something, even if it was when you were washing?"

Then she surmised that, having started life as I had done, always surrounded by others, I had not been able

to become intimately acquainted with my own body. Of course, I had soaped myself carefully, from my anus to my vulva, as the women had told me to do after each visit to the toilet, but they were washing movements which had not taught me that those parts of my body had special qualities. I did not talk to her about the eruption, which I had in fact long forgotten, and it was only much later that I made the connection between that brief thrill and the pleasures of love.

Our conversations were fairly haphazard for often Anthea was so astonished at my ignorance that she lost the thread of her explanations. I imagined my insides. Sometimes she cleared a patch of ground and drew in the dust. She told me about the stomach, the intestine, and then the heart, the blood vessels and circulation. I was interested in everything and I asked her more than she knew.

"When I was training to be a nurse, I learned lots of things that I forgot, because I never used them after the exams, and then, I think that years of being drugged made me forget some of the rest. Dorothy probably died from heart failure. While it was happening, I tried to remember: the weakness of the heart affects the circulatory system, the kidneys and the lungs, it's all part of a perfectly logical system that I used to find so beautiful, but I could not remember the way it worked."

"What use would it have been to you?"

"None, you're right, because I didn't have any medicines. I tried, knowing that it was pointless, just because I needed to know. Like you."

I could feel my intestine, there were rumbles, flatulence and, regularly, stools. My genitals were cloaked in silence. Out of curiosity, sometimes, when I went to the river to

wash, I would seek out my vagina: I could barely insert the tip of my finger because of the hymen that sealed it like a door closing off a corridor. I imagined it to be long and narrow, closed at each end, like the corridors in the bunkers: at the entrance, that barrier that only a man can break with his penis, further, the neck of the womb that only the baby about to be born can pass through on its way out of the great room inside. I imagined smooth, supple, dark red walls, and at the very end, the furthest entrances, the tiny orifices of the oviducts along which, in my body, no egg had ever travelled. Then there was the great fringed foliage of the Fallopian tubes which enveloped the ovaries where the most important work should have taken place, the slow and regular maturing of the egg. But they were sterile, perhaps shrivelled, dried up, in this world where they had no purpose. My brain knew that there were no men, and it ordered my pituitary gland not to worry about gonads, it was busy enough with the liver, the spleen, the pancreas, the thyroid gland, the bone marrow and all the other tasks that were vital to my survival, it was pointless devoting itself to a job that served no purpose. It had not permitted any of my eggs to mature. It had barely allowed my breasts and pubic hair to grow, then it had given up. When I was undernourished in the bunker, my body would have had to compensate for the loss of blood, and it had decided that, with no sperm available, there was no need for the eggs to be released and migrate down towards the uterus. My endometrium was flat. I had never seen a ploughed field, for we had no seeds, we had nothing to plant, and my womb would never have to expand to hold a baby, so it would not matter if it shrank or shrivelled up.

While on the subject of couples, Anthea had also explained that there was a way of doing it by oneself, and during my explorations of my body, I wanted to find out what I could get out of it. I allowed my fingers to roam at length over the regions that are supposed to give pleasure: my mucous membranes felt my fingers and my fingers felt my mucous membranes, but that was it. I was not surprised, because I had always suspected I was not like the others.

When we were completely settled in what we were now to call the village, I sometimes felt discontented and impatient, I would have liked to carry on looking, but of course, I did not even know what for and I made an effort to control my irritability. Anthea had taught me everything she knew: talking with her, I gradually realised that I often made linguistic mistakes which she automatically corrected. She explained what grammar was and I was delighted to discover something new to be learned.

"But none of us is capable of teaching you grammar!" she told me. "There does not even happen to be a primary school teacher among us."

"But when you correct me, what do you base that on?"

She thought.

"On habit. And vague memories, rules that I once knew and that I would find it very hard to recall."

"Couldn't you tell me one, any one?"

I saw her concentrate, as in the past, the first time she had tried to do mental arithmetic. She smiled at me:

"A relative clause is a clause introduced by a relative pronoun and used to qualify a preceding noun or pronoun."

"Oh! What's a clause? and a noun? and a pronoun?"

I was not familiar with any of these terms for, of course,

I had not learned to speak in a systematic way, but by repeating mechanically what I heard. Anthea launched into some rather confused explanations, and called Margaret to the rescue, and then Helen, who had once tried, with Isabel, to teach me the multiplication tables, and soon there were several of them, arguing heatedly and mustering the little they remembered. They were not averse to the idea of resuming my incomplete education and they discovered that they too could learn from it. Why didn't they try to speak better? they said. Rose could sing and thus provide us with some precious pleasure, but everybody could speak and find it enjoyable. I was a hardworking pupil. For the others, it was a sort of game which they enjoyed for a while: we did not have much in the way of entertainment, and we never refused anything that was on offer.

The idea of cultivating the few pleasures to which we had access developed. Several of the women took a renewed interest in their appearance and, as we now had scissors and combs – Greta had found two in the bunkers – we started looking after our hair. We twisted wire to make hairpins, and Alice, who had been a hairdresser, made chignons for those who wanted to keep their hair long. But that did not last, as the combs lost their teeth and we were unable to replace them.

We also played draughts: it had been Angela's idea. She had asked me to saw some planks and nail them together. Then she drew boxes using charred sticks, and then we had to cut small rounds of wood and blacken half of them. They taught me the rules, but I never became a good player, because I could not see the point of winning a game.

"But it's the satisfaction of being the best, and of using your brain!" said Anthea.

I understood the pleasure of using my brain well enough, but I found it ridiculous to make so much effort just to end up putting the pieces away in an empty box, or arranging them on the board and starting all over again.

We did not find much else. We would happily have made ourselves clothes, but fabric and thread were still hard to come by. We lived a peaceful existence, for, eventually, the lovers' quarrels stopped. The older women were ageing visibly, and they forgot the little passion that had drawn them together. Death made a sudden reappearance: one morning, Bernadette did not wake up. Like Mary-Jane, she had been a discreet person, and had remained so right up to this abrupt end, which came completely out of the blue. Then Margaret grew very weak, she lost her memory, could no longer recognise us and was unable to get up. She refused any food except for liquids and became incontinent. Following Anthea's instructions, I built what she called a rack and we made a hole in the mattress, covered with leaves, which we changed regularly, but even so, there was an unpleasant smell in our house, where her life was drawing to a close. Elizabeth, who had been her lover at the beginning of our wanderings, came and stayed with us, as if her affection had been revived by Margaret's predicament. It lasted for two months, then it suddenly worsened, she became distraught, at night she had bad dreams which made her scream. Then she would screw up the strength to get up and run outside, or she would be seized by terrible rages: that was how she died, screaming curses. All of a sudden, while she was struggling against the women who were trying to help her, she went rigid staring at Elizabeth, flung out her arm as if to hit her and

was wracked by a spasm. She drew herself up to her full height and stated very clearly:

"No, it is out of the question!"

And fell down dead.

As a burial spot, first for Bernadette and then for Margaret, we chose a clearing in the middle of the wood. For each of them we made a little monument with a mound of stones and a wooden cross on which we wrote their names. The women carved them as best they could with old knives, after which they burnt in the letters with glowing brands from the fire. The second tomb was dug beside the first, and the women called this place the cemetery. Rose sang. A great sorrow reigned over the village.

Death had begun its work. Who would it single out next time? A vague melancholy set in, I think they were wondering why they were wearing themselves out trying to survive from day to day in this alien land where only the grave awaited them, but they did not talk about it. They no longer chatted endlessly about nothing, they came and went in silence, slowly, as if weighed down by inevitability. But the days went by, and then the months, and the sense of an imminent disaster was dispelled. I realised the day when Elizabeth, who was now the oldest, said to us laughingly:

"It'll be my turn next, and look how active I still am!"

She had just come back from the woods with a heavy armful of branches for the fire and, it was true, she was not even panting.

Then we started planning ahead again. In the cold store, there was still a large stock of meat, but Helen and Isabel had worked out that with thirty-six of us, it would not last more than five years. I refrained, and I was probably not the

only one, from saying that our numbers would decrease. There was no question of replenishing our supplies from another bunker, the nearest was a ten-day hike away and the meat would go off before we got back. The idea of emigrating was floated and I was thrilled at the thought of constructing another village. I had enjoyed building, I started thinking up new arrangements and even became quite excited, offering to add new houses to the village for those who wanted a little more privacy. Also, I had become skilled, and, apart from the occasional shelf, I rarely had the opportunity to use my talents. My suggestion was greeted with approval, several of the women who lived as couples said that they would in fact prefer to live on their own. But the most urgent problem was that of our clothing: our dresses were in tatters. In fact, we could have gone naked, the climate was so mild, at least during the hottest season, but the women objected. The years of incarceration with no privacy under the watchful eye of the guards had made modesty a luxury which no-one wished to forego. Besides, we had almost run out of soap. We decided to send an expedition towards the west, a direction that we had not yet taken. Four of us set off, Denise, Frances, Greta and myself, for we were the youngest and strongest. Anthea was probably the same age as the three women who were accompanying me, but she was the nurse, the only one who could understand the women's ailments and perhaps, despite the lack of medicines, find some remedy, so it seemed best for her to stay behind in the village. We were to fetch fabric, sandals, soap and salt, and identify another site in case we did decide to move. Those who stayed behind promised to cut down trees and lay them to dry so that they would be ready on our return.

It was an enjoyable expedition. We marked the way with big arrows made of stones, so that we would not get lost in this monotonous landscape. We went from hilltop to hilltop to get a good view of our surroundings. It was not until we reached the ninth bunker that we found fabric, but already in the second, we had found a packet of coffee. I had never tasted coffee and I did not like it very much. I watched my companions shriek with delight and pleasure as they imagined the others' joy when they returned with such a wonderful find, but I was unable to share their excitement. We found as much salt and soap as we needed, but not a single sandal, which distressed us, until Denise exclaimed that we should have thought of it years ago, that we should have taken the leather boots and cut sandals from the legs.

"We're not very resourceful, are we!" said Greta, ruefully.

"We come from a world where it wasn't necessary, everything was ready-made and we never asked how things were produced," replied Frances.

They did not like talking about the past any more than they had done before, and would have said nothing further, but it was a long hike and this was a good opportunity. Since Anthea had taught me a lot of things, I was less bashful about asking questions.

"Tell me," I said, "what was it like? How did you live?"

At first, they were reluctant to answer, then they gave in. At first, they were talking to me, but it turned out that they had never told each other their life stories and that they were enjoying it. Frances had been married with two children, Paul and Mary. When the catastrophe struck, she had been planning to have a third, and, because her memories were so terribly hazy, she did not know whether

she had been pregnant and lost the baby, or whether she had just been planning another one. Her husband was called Lawrence, and she had met him when she was twenty-three, on the rebound from a love affair which she had thought she would never get over. As she talked, she kept saying:

"But it's all so ordinary, it's the same as everybody else!"

As if she did not realise that for me, nothing was ordinary, since nothing had happened to me.

"The child's right, nothing is ordinary," said Denise, "when it's happening to you. I didn't have any children, but I wanted them and I always envied those who did."

When all their lives had been shattered, she was on her second divorce, for, she said, she always chose the wrong men and she was never happy with them. Greta could not understand why Denise kept remarrying. She herself had never married, but had lived for years with the same lover with whom she had been very happy. That shocked Denise. And they began arguing about whether marriage was a good thing or not, in that wilderness where there were no men to marry, to be unfaithful to or to leave, and, when they realised, they burst out laughing. Even I recognised the absurdity of the situation and laughed with them. Honestly! When I think about it, I realise that I laughed a lot more often than I thought! But later, they cried, and I was no longer able to understand them. Then they felt sorry for me, for I would never experience love, and it was the same as when they talked about chocolate or the joys of a long, hot bath; I believed them without really being able to imagine what they were talking about.

Greta had had a son by this man she never married, but apart from naming them, none of them would ever talk

about their children. On that subject, my questions were unable to break through their defences. Later, Anthea tried to explain their reluctance to me:

"You can't understand, and as I didn't have any children myself, I probably don't understand completely either, but just think about what could have happened to their children! Being alone, like you, growing up among strangers who were not in a position to take proper care of them? or killed? or dumped in groups of forty in bunkers, living like animals, dying for want of attention? They don't want to think about their children. They are probably all dead, and better off that way. If Frances was pregnant, she must have had a miscarriage. You have never seen a child, you don't know what that means, their vulnerability, their trust, the love you feel for them, the anxiety, being ready to give up your life, ready to die to save them, and it is unbearable to imagine a child's pain."

It is true that I know nothing of all that and that I have no memories of my own childhood. That is perhaps why I am so different from the others. I must be lacking in certain experiences which make you fully human.

I do not remember their accounts very well, probably because there were too many things that I had not experienced and which I could not picture. They would say: "We went dancing." What was dancing? They explained, they formed couples, facing each other. Denise placed her left hand on Frances' waist and held her right hand up in the air, then they spun round. Yes, but what about the music? The sound of an accordion, or a violin? They sang waltzes, one, two, three, one, two, three. As someone who had counted my own heartbeats for so long, I could understand a repetitive rhythm, but I could never imagine the

sound of the band, nor that of those laughing boys who made them lovesick, nor those chiffon or silk dresses which swirled around them and made them look so beautiful. They spoke of creeping home at dawn, angry parents who scolded them, kisses, jilted lovers, men they were in love with but who did not like them, and it was all a muddle in my head. Gradually, I stopped asking them to tell me about their world, and I gave up trying to imagine it. I know very well that I come from it. I had a father and a mother, who probably went dancing, who got married, or left each other, who were torn from each other by the catastrophe like Frances and Lawrence. Perhaps one of the dead women I had seen in the bunkers was my mother, and my father is lying mummified near the bars of one of the prisons: all the links between them and me have been severed. There is no continuity, and the world from which I have come is completely foreign to me. I have not heard its music, I have not seen its painting, I have not read its books, except for the handful I found in the refuge and of which I understood little: I know only the stony plain, wandering and the gradual loss of hope. I am the sterile offspring of a race of which I know nothing, not even whether it has become extinct. Perhaps, somewhere, humanity is flourishing under the stars, unaware that a daughter of its blood is ending her days in silence. There is nothing we can do about it.

Such thoughts ought to make me weep. But tears never come to my eyes except when I think about Anthea, a woman I actually knew. I am not able to mourn for what I have not known.

Every evening we would collect a huge pile of dead wood and make a fire. We grilled sausages over it coated

with mustard, of which we had found a few jars, and we ate them with flour-cakes cooked over the embers. We were relaxed and tired, and I think that, for a while, my companions' nostalgia was allayed, they were able to experience the vast silence of the plain, the constant rustle of the grass. We were in no hurry to sleep, we listened to the breeze which always whistled the same soft note. Apart from Rose's powerful soprano, it was the only music I had heard.

Sometimes, as I returned to the group sitting around the fire, I would feel a rush of emotion; I was moved by the flickering of the flames in the night, the silhouettes of the women resting, the interplay of words or Denise's reedy voice carrying the laments of another era across the plain, and I understood what Anthea called beauty, which apparently had been so abundant in their world.

After four months, we set out for home. We had gone round in a huge circle, so it only took us a month to return to the village. We were slightly apprehensive, but there had been no deaths. The timber promised for the new buildings was ready and we set to work. I enjoyed it immensely. We had found two excellent sites to move to if we decided to leave our present settlement, but that seemed unlikely as I could see that the women were happy in their new houses and would not consent to leave until the cold store was practically empty. Nevertheless, when the houses were finished, I went on a quick expedition with Anthea, to the nearest place: the river was nice and wide, rich in aquatic plants, with a clayey bed which she said might be useful for making bricks. There was a small wood, vital for timber.

"I don't know whether you have noticed that we haven't got many trees left," she said. "They don't grow very fast

and we may run out of wood before we run out of meat."

Shortly after our return, Angela announced that she was not well. She had giddy spells, memory lapses and had a feeling of exhaustion that rest could not cure. She did not think she was older than sixty or sixty-five, but she came from a family where people did not live to a very old age, she told us, and she did not want us, should the situation arise, to let her suffer, or deteriorate, as Margaret had done.

"What do you want us to do?" protested Anthea. "I understand what you are asking and, if I had syringes and medicines, I would promise anything you like. But here?"

"There are always the knives," replied Angela. "You know just where to strike to pierce the heart."

It was not necessary. She soon fell into a coma and died within three days, but the idea took root in Anthea's mind. She thought of Mary-Jane who had gone off to hang herself in the bunker.

"You see, it keeps haunting me, gnawing at me. She fled all alone in the middle of the night, and perhaps she cried out in pain while making her rope. I feel as though I abandoned her. Angela was right: I know where the heart is and how to plunge a knife in to stop it. I think that if anyone else suffers the same pain as Mary-Jane, it will be my duty to do what is necessary, but I'm afraid of being too much of a coward."

"You can teach me," I said. "I could do it. I'm not like the rest of you."

The thirteenth year after our escape, we decided to move because we had almost run out of meat. There had been further deaths and there were only thirty-two of us left, but it had always happened either fairly quickly or fairly calmly and I had not yet had to carry out my

promise. With the few trees we still had, and the trolley wheels, we built makeshift carts on which we loaded the tables and chairs. We went to a site that was a three-week trek from the first village, and we built ten houses: the first one was as big as possible, and the others were smaller, to accommodate just a few women. It was a huge task but one which, naturally, gave us enormous pleasure. We had become good carpenters and our roofs were works of art. We even managed to make excellent bricks with mud from the river-bed and our walls may not have been completely straight, but they held up. We tried to make gardens around the front door by gathering a few of the rare wild flowers, but they always died, no matter how carefully we watered them.

Greta, Anthea, Frances and I shared a house. Most of the women were living as couples, except for Denise, Annabel and Laura who set up as a threesome, but we only made one kitchen and we ate our meals together, at tables arranged in a big square. Once the village was built, which took a good year, we began to dread idleness. Some of the women had really taken to woodwork and I went on several expeditions to find other types of tree or thicker trunks. Sometimes, I found a hollow branch which I would bring back for Rose. She wanted to carve a flute, but was never satisfied with the result. None of us had learned the simple things, such as pottery, or the art of recognising herbs, and Anthea said that often, even a land as arid as this ought to provide more resources for creativity than the things we had thought of so far. For example, the aquatic plants that we had used for making thatched roofs, if they were properly treated could perhaps be used for knitting and weaving? Frances remembered that flax

had to be retted, but what was retting? Someone also suggested letting the wood soak for a long time and then bending it: our efforts were fruitless and, after a few disappointments, we gave up.

Gradually, the futility of all our attempts dampened our spirits. Our bed and board were guaranteed, a few metres of fabric satisfied our modesty, a few kilos of soft soap met our hygiene requirements: we were going to die one by one without having understood anything of what had happened to us and, as the years went by, our questions petered out. In the bunkers, the lights were still on, and I could not resign myself never to understanding. Where did the electricity come from? Somewhere, there had to be a power station operating, Anthea had told me. Was it entirely automated? Were there still some people who operated it without knowing why? Would it stop one day and the meat rot in the cold stores? Nobody dreamed of seeing rescuers appear and the few remaining questions were always about our failure. I did not dare say that I wanted to carry on walking, exploring, I knew they would think I was crazy.

Our mood was not one of despair, which Anthea explained to me was a violent feeling that led to great emotional outbursts, but it was rather one of equanimity. There were no longer extensive conversations on every subject, nor the nervous jollity of before. During the year when we were building the new village, the women had become animated again, but then they lapsed into the old sluggishness, never hurrying to complete any task, as there were so few that they preferred to draw them out. That made them seem like old women. They had no reason to look up, so they walked with a stoop. The last passions had

fizzled out, their hair was going grey and they seemed to have lost the desire to live. We had survived the prison, the plain, the loss of all hope: the women discovered that survival is never more than putting off the moment of death. They continued to eat, drink and sleep: somewhere in the shadows, surrender, silent capitulation and death were gnawing away. We watched them grow thin; the furrows on their dejected faces grew deeper, they easily became breathless, their hips were painful and their legs swollen. Elizabeth suffered from haemorrhages, Greta stomach pains and Anna became paralysed down one side of her body.

She could no longer speak, one eye was closed and the other begged. We all knew what she was asking, and Anthea, weeping, was unable to grant it.

"You said to me that you would be able to," she murmured, not daring to meet my eye.

"I'll do it," I told her.

I could not really understand, if that was what Anna wanted and we could offer her no other relief, why it was so difficult for them to do it. I think I understand them now that I have cried, but I cannot be sure, for, even though I have lived most of my life with them, I am well aware that I was always different from them. I am probably missing a chunk of their past.

She explained everything to me with precision. You had to count the ribs going down from the collarbone, then find the edge of the sternum and go back three fingers. She showed me on her own breast the exact spot where I would have to plunge the knife in hard, with a swift, single stroke.

"Then, when it's my turn, you'll know what to do."

They all went out of the house where Anna was lying and I was left alone with her. I sat beside her. She looked at me and I saw, on what remained of her face, that she was trying to smile at me. I drew back the blanket from her emaciated chest, and had no difficulty in counting the protruding ribs, nor in locating the edge of the sternum. I placed my finger on the spot and I could feel the beating of her heart, which seemed vigorous. It was certain that if we did not intervene, she could remain the victim of this appalling condition for a long time. She raised the arm that she could still move and stroked my cheek while I placed on her skin the point of the knife that I had spent ages sharpening. I was swift and accurate, her arm fell back and her heart was no longer beating.

I received that caress several times – the only one that I was able to abide – the silent gratitude of a woman receiving death at my hands. None wanted to endure pain and I think they were in a hurry to die. I do not know how many I killed: I who count everything, that was one thing I did not count. Each time, even when they were contorted with the most violent pain, I saw their tormented faces relax as I was about to strike, and it did not make me cry for I sensed their haste and their relief. It was only at the moment of death that they admitted their despair and rushed headlong towards the great dark doors that I opened for them, leaving the sterile plain where their lives had gone awry without a glance behind them, eager to embrace another world which perhaps did not exist, but they preferred nothingness to the futile succession of empty days, and I know that, at that moment, they loved me. My hand never trembled. We became strange accomplices during their last moments, when I was the chosen companion, the

one who would unravel their incomprehensible fate, closer than their forgotten lovers, dead in the bunkers or under another sky, closer than their weeping lovers waiting at the door for me to come out, the knife wrapped in a thick rag that would conceal any drops of blood, and nod my head confirming that it was all over, that the sick woman's suffering was at an end, and that, at least for one of us, the agony was over. Then we could hum the song of death. Afterwards, we would gaze at each other for a moment in silence, then they would go in and shroud the dead woman in a blanket, the newest and best one we had. At nightfall, we would carry her to the cemetery and place her gently in her grave. One after the other, they were buried under that sky and neither they nor I knew if it was the one under which we had been born.

It was not necessary for me to stop Anthea's heart. Each death had contributed a little to killing her. There had been so much hope on our escape from the prison, and then this slow dissipation, the gradual abandonment of all expectations, a defeat that had killed everything without a battle. She wondered when we had realised that we were as much prisoners out in the open as we had been behind bars: was it after finding the second bunker when we had been terrified to see the thirty-nine other dead women, heaped up or collapsed on top of each other? or the first time we went down a staircase with no further hope of finding the cage open? or when Mary-Jane had hanged herself? When did we know that we had no future, that we would continue to live as parasites on those who had locked us up, slipping below ground to steal our food from the departed enemy? And how was it that we had not died from sheer nausea? She mulled over these questions endlessly, and I

listened in silence. The impossibility of finding any answers fuelled the grief that was killing her. When there were only six of us left, and Greta died, Anthea no longer had the strength to stand, she had to be carried to the cemetery. We used a litter, made like the one on which Dorothy had died, and Anthea lay on her back gazing up at the sky as we walked, still wondering if it was that of planet Earth. There was a moon. The women always said that it looked like the moon they had known, but they were not sure they could trust their own memories. Anthea's sight had grown poor, she screwed up her eyes with a futile persistence. When we arrived, Greta was already lying in her grave and Laura was keeping vigil. Rose was no longer alive, but the women had learned the song and their voices echoed for a long time over the plain, for they repeated it several times. I had never sung. We did not sing in the bunker and afterwards it was too late, I had a lump in my throat. Nor could I shout, I could only produce a raucous croak that did not travel far. I do not know if I am still able to speak. Of course, all I have to do is try, but I do not seem to want to. And what does it matter if I have become mute in a world where there is nobody to talk to?

We stood at the graveside for a long time, in silence. From time to time, one of the women would repeat the terrible words: "From the depths, I call on you, O Lord." Perhaps that isn't exactly the right translation, none of us really knew that dead language whose words they sang out over a land that was almost dead, they had told me what they understood. Their voices soared up, they gazed at the dark sky and I think that they somehow expected a reply, but nothing ever crossed that vault except for the silent movement of the stars. Then, one after the other, they fell

silent, the chorus died out like an untended fire, and silence descended, barely disturbed by the lightest of winds that always blows. All that was left for us to do was to throw earth over the emaciated body that was barely discernible under the blanket and then make our way slowly back to the village of empty houses.

The women placed the litter next to the bed and left us alone. I settled Anthea in her bed – she had grown so thin that I could lift her easily. I covered her well because she had become very sensitive to the cold, and we bade each other goodnight. But I could hear her crying, and I could not sleep. I went over and sat on the edge of her bed. She asked me to hold her hand. She knew how much I hated touching anyone and I understood that if she was asking me to overcome my revulsion, it was because she desperately needed this pathetic contact.

"You know that you will end up alone," she said.

I often thought about it.

"I looked after you as best I could when you were little, and later I taught you everything I knew. But soon I will not be able to be with you any more. I feel as though I'm deserting you."

"You have no choice," I replied.

"How will you survive?"

"I'll move on. I'll carry on looking. If it had been up to me, I would never have stopped, but I could see that the others couldn't carry on any more."

"Will you cope? Won't you go mad?"

"I have no idea what you mean by madness. You know I'm not like the rest of you. I haven't known the things you miss so badly, or if I ever did, I don't remember anything, and that hasn't done me any harm. To me it feels

as though I have always been alone, even among all of you, because I am so different. I have never really understood you, I didn't know what you were talking about."

"It's true," she agreed, "you are the only one of us who belongs to this country."

"No, this country belongs to me. I will be its sole proprietor and everything here will be mine."

After that, she lay silent for a long time. I suppose she was thinking about the old days, when she had led a life that made sense and that she had lost, for sometimes tears ran down her cheeks, and I wiped them gently away. Otherwise, we did not move, and I could feel her irregular heartbeat, even in her hand. I had learned to recognise that kind of rhythm, which gets weaker and weaker. You think it has stopped, but it starts up again, but there is no hope, life is not tenacious enough to win. I was not sure that Anthea would see the dawn. At some time in the night, she asked me if I could bear to hold her in my arms.

"I'm so cold."

I offered to go and get another blanket, she nodded and smiled feebly.

"I need to be held."

That cost me an effort which I am certain I managed to hide. I lay down beside her, she rested her head on my shoulder and I hugged her to me.

"I have loved you so much," she told me.

She drifted off thus, into a light sleep, and I think she dreamed for she sometimes made little movements and muttered indistinctly. Day was beginning to break when she became completely calm. She was breathing very softly. I was not afraid of falling asleep and I concentrated my attention on her ebbing life. I did not know exactly when

she stopped breathing, we were both so tranquil and silent, and death is sometimes so discreet, it steals in noiselessly, stays for only a moment and carries off its prey, that I did not notice the change. When I was sure it was all over, I lay there for a long time, holding her to me, as she had wanted.

It was all I could do.

Frances, Denise, Laura and I were the only ones left. A few months later, Frances had a fall in the house and broke her legs. Anthea had explained to me about these fractures in elderly women, and there was no chance of her recovery. Frances was in such pain that she did not even want us to lift her or make her more comfortable. She asked me to stab her immediately, she did not want to suffer a moment longer than was necessary. I left her alone with Denise and Laura while I ensured that the knife was as sharp as possible. On my return, the two able-bodied women rose to leave the house, and something strange happened: both of them stopped as they passed me and hugged me, as if they were thanking me for what I was about to do. I knelt beside Frances, who gripped my shoulders and pulled me towards her, to place a kiss on each of my cheeks.

"You are kind," she said.

That touched me. I smiled at her and she was smiling as the knife went in.

On our return from the cemetery, Denise asked me to do the same for her, but I do not know why it was impossible for me to do it to a woman who was still in good health, even if I knew how much grief she was suffering. She had to wait three years, when she became semi-paralysed, like Anna, except her face was not affected and she could talk.

"Now, will you?"

"Now, it's different. I must do it."

And so I was left alone with Laura. Apart from me, she had been the youngest of the women and her death did not seem imminent. Although she had accompanied me on several expeditions, I did not have a spontaneous liking for her. She was rather grumpy and always complaining. When we were alone, her personality changed. She never protested at my decisions and, to be honest, it would have required a lot of imagination to protest against what I exaggeratedly call decisions, for if I said it was time to go and fetch some meat from the nearest bunker, or to wash our clothes, or to light a fire, it was always because we were getting low on meat and our dresses were dirty. It seemed that she allowed herself to be completely guided by me: I realised that she had totally lost interest in her life.

One morning, as I was returning to the village laden with cans of food, I was struck by her absent air. It was the season when it rains the least, I had put the bench outside the door, and I found her sitting there, staring into space. For years, her eyesight had been poor: now, she was gazing into the distance without even screwing up her eyes, although she said this helped her distinguish things. Her hands were resting on her thighs, but upside down, with her palms upturned, as if she had forgotten to turn them over, which made her look strange, neglected, a woman thrown there whom nobody had taken the trouble to tidy up, like a garment dropped in a hurry lying crumpled on the floor. Her thighs were slightly apart. Before, in the prison, Laura had been thin, like all the others, then she had grown fat, complaining all the time that she could not

control her appetite, but since the death of her lover, Alice, she had lost interest in food and had lost a lot of weight. Now she had resumed the attitude of a corpulent woman whose knees did not touch when her legs were together, because of the size of her thighs, as if her body no longer recognised itself in the present. Her dress which had ridden up slightly, revealed her withered, fragile flesh. It was I who had made that dress, meticulously assembling scraps of fabric that were still useable from the least worn tunics, and she had watched me work, as if she could not really understand why I busied myself so. Then she had put on the dress and recovered her wits for a moment to thank me. We had always placed a lot of emphasis on manners, even back in the bunker, probably to distinguish ourselves from the guards and their whips.

I went up to her, talking so as not to give her a fright. I told her that I had brought back some soup, that we could eat soon, and that I had brought up some soap because our last packet was nearly empty.

"But I was right, I searched all over once again, there's no more thread, I shan't be able to mend your dress."

In the past, we had used her hair to sew with, but now it had stopped growing, it was short and sparse.

As I spoke to her, I was thinking that I would have to go on an expedition because we were going to run out of soap too, but I refrained from saying so. In fact, I was only talking for the sake of making a noise, I was rather frightened by her expression that was so vacant, so absent that she looked as if she was asleep with her eyes open. She jumped violently, turned her head towards me and, as she had told me before, must have seen only a vague shape.

"Oh, it's you, child," she said as if she did not remember that there were only the two of us left. "You're a good girl. I'm not much help to you."

I said a few reassuring words and went in to light the fire. She followed me slowly and stood beside me. She watched me without seeming able to think of a way to assist.

"Do you think I will live much longer?" she asked.

Her tone was calm and ordinary, she was asking an ordinary question, she would happily listen to the answer and then think of something else. Surely such a lack of interest in her own concerns could only be a sign of impending death.

The women had only ever called me "child", and even now that I have been alone for such a long time, and because I have no other name, I still have a vague feeling that I am the youngest, even though there is nobody left with whom to compare my age. I thought back to the days when I had been furious and full of contempt, when I thought they were laughing at me, that I knew nothing and they knew everything, and I found Laura's consulting me like an oracle heart-rending. She was just standing there, not knowing what to do with her body.

"Do you feel ill?"

I had been so slow to reply that she must have forgotten her question. She looked taken aback, pondered with difficulty and nodded.

"I'm tired. But everyone's tired, aren't they?"

Everyone: the two of us.

"Yes, everyone," I replied calmly.

If she did not remember that everyone was dead, why remind her?

The fire had got going. I put on the logs, covered it and picked up a saucepan. I chose two cans containing tomato soup. Anthea had taught me to read the labels and I was delighted to discover that they were the kind that contained little meatballs. Laura stood beside me, as if she could not think what else to do. She seemed to be unsteady on her legs: it was not very obvious, and I was not certain. I told myself at first it was her lost air that made me think that, but as she stopped living shortly afterwards, it is likely that she was finding it hard to stay on her feet. I led her gently to a chair, at the big table, sat her down and placed a plate and glass in front of her:

"We'll be eating in a few minutes."

"If you like," she replied.

I looked at her carefully: her face was utterly devoid of expression and it was probably my own anxiety that made me think she looked lost. Her eyes had a glazed look, her arms hung by her sides. I wanted to place them in her lap, that reminded me of the gesture I had so often made, crossing the arms of a dead woman on her chest, and then closing her eyes, and I held back. But at the same time I realised that I was certain she was dying.

Like that, on her feet, without being ill? It was not the body that was giving up, but the spirit, which had grown increasingly weary of animating those muscles, of making that heart beat, of going through all the motions of living, the spirit that nothing had nourished for such a long time, that had watched its sisters die and that had for its only companion a woman who did not like her and whom she did not like. How tragic! I said to myself, how tragic! She had, in the past, lived out twenty or twenty-five years of her legitimate destiny, and then crazy events had taken

place and she had entered a world of absurdity, surrounded by strange women who were as confused as she was. All the same, she had attempted to love. I tried to remember Alice, a lively, impatient woman, who used to say to me: "Go away and play!" when I disturbed her and then was apologetic. They had lived together in a little house, they argued noisily and made up again with great promises: you have to do something to pass the time. I sat down in front of Laura, I sincerely wanted to say some helpful words, which would sustain her, but, to tell the truth, in this sterile land, in the silence and the solitude, ignorant and sterile myself, what could I give her? Why should she want to live? We were doing nothing, we were going nowhere, we were nobody.

"You see," I said to her, "I want to go off exploring. I don't want to end my days here, eating canned food only for it to come out again later."

She looked up. You could see that she was really trying to understand what I had said. Then, to help her, I said:

"I'm going off exploring."

"But there's nothing," she said, astonished, "only the bunkers."

Thinking was a great effort for her.

"There aren't even any seasons."

"We don't know. We gave up too soon. We only searched for two years, didn't we?"

"That was because of the old women. We had to keep stopping so that they could die in peace. And sometimes it took them such a long time. They kept feeling better and we thought they'd recover."

"I want to leave. I'm not old."

"Wait," she said, "wait. I shan't be long."

She understood me. We both knew that she was unable to cope on her own, that she would not have the strength to go and get food from the bunkers or to gather enough wood for her fire, and that I could not abandon her.

The soup was hot. We ate in silence, then I went to wash up in the river. When I returned, she was sitting on the bench again, waiting for me to come back. Then she would wait until she felt sleepy and go and lie down on her mattress and sleep. While asleep, she would be waiting to wake up.

I did not want her to die: but how could I have wanted her to live? Several times during the afternoon, I felt a tremor of impatience. I was overjoyed at the idea that I was going to be free. To calm my excitement, I began working out what I would need. I would take one of the big bags in which I would put enough provisions for two weeks, two blankets, for I had become accustomed to sleeping on a mattress and I was afraid I would find the ground too hard. Later, when I had adjusted, one would be enough, and my load would be lighter. I would need lots of matches, a small shovel and boots. I must remember to take some soap. My dress was in complete tatters, but I was bound to find some fabric and thread, because I would regularly come across bunkers where I could find fresh supplies. I would have to make sure I found the right size boots if I wanted to walk a long way. In the past, I had had the unpleasant experience of blisters and for years, I had been living in sandals. We had never found any socks and the skin of my feet had grown soft, but I knew it would soon harden.

I bustled to and fro, devoting myself happily to the too few domestic tasks, and my mind busied itself planning the route, I kept going over the list of things I needed to take, enumerating, repeating, summarising, to the point where I began to feel very irritable. I would soon have done everything that it was possible to do: the floor was swept, the mattresses turned, the blankets shaken, there was nothing left to wash or put away. I went out and sat on a chair facing Laura. She was staring at the sky, at the point where the sun would set later, and her gaze was more vacant, more absent than ever. Her breathing was regular. Her hands were once again resting palm upwards on her thighs and I could see a tiny artery pulsing on the outside of her wrist: it was regular, clear and strong. That is why I do not think she died of a physical illness, but that she abandoned that unflagging body which would have carried on for years. Except for her eyes. She heard me coming, muttered a few words, so softly that I did not understand, but I did not feel like asking her to repeat them. What could she have to say to me? What did we have to tell each other which was of the slightest interest? That it was a fine day, that it was unlikely to rain that night, that the sun was going down? She was no more interested in telling me than I was in hearing it and she had no doubt only attempted to speak to me out of politeness, to show that she was glad of my company, which was probably not entirely true. What could I give her, other than food and drink, which would only prolong an existence she no longer desired?

"Yes, of course," I said.

That satisfied her. We were in agreement, without being

too sure over what. Or perhaps over the fact that we had nothing in common. And so we sat in silence.

I did not watch the sky: I was fascinated by Laura. She seemed to be disappearing inside herself, withdrawing further and further. At first, there was still some expression on her face, the ghost of the smile she had given to welcome me, a shadow of weariness, a faint grimace when an insect settled on her hand. She did not budge, I brushed the creature away but she was seemingly oblivious. The sun was beginning to go down, it illuminated her face, there was no shadow: there was nothing to see except for skin, taut over tissue that was still living, an organic model, with peaks and troughs, different from those of a plain or a hill, that the eyes could explore but without learning anything other than their configuration. I could have touched her, for sure, run my hands over her cheeks: would she have felt it? There was a moment when everything was as if suspended, I could see clearly that the little artery in her wrist was still beating, and yet, I was sure that Laura was dead. Her breathing was soft and regular, with an automatic rhythm that was unable to stop, but she was no longer thinking. Anthea, in the past, had explained to me what an electroencephalogram was: hers would have been flat. Sitting on the bench, gazing in the direction of the setting sun, she lost her mind in the cerebral convolutions, in the mysterious nooks and crannies of the memory, she had gone backwards, seeking a world which made sense, losing her way among the labyrinths, slowly deteriorating, dimming, becoming obliterated noiselessly and then fading away so gradually that it was impossible to pinpoint the transition between the flickering little flame and the shadows. The

sun was touching the horizon, her wrist stood out clearly in the evening light, I saw that there was no more movement under the white skin. I let out a deep sigh. My last tie had been cut.

I SAT LOOKING AT HER for a long time, then I lay her on the bench, crossed her hands on her chest, carefully placing her palms downwards. I did not have to close her almost blind eyes, which had shut of their own accord. There was no reason to delay: I picked up the shovel and went to dig behind the big house, where the others were already buried. It was a very clear night, as always when the sky was cloudless, even though there was no moon. I did not need to dig a very deep hole since there were no animals to come and disinter the bodies, and I would not bother to leave a mound or sign indicating that the remains of a human being lay there: I would remember and who else was there to tell? The grave was ready in an hour. I had to carry Laura there. I had thought about it while I was digging: I was alone and, even though she had lost weight, I doubted whether I would be able to carry her. The idea of putting her on the trolley repelled me: it was too short, her legs would swing grotesquely and I wanted to convey her in a dignified manner. I was in a real quandary, and it was only when I went back to her that the idea came to me, when I caught sight of the big table that I had made such a long time ago. I would balance it on the trolley, then I would place Laura on it, carefully shrouded in the best

blanket. It was very difficult, but I suspected that years of a sedentary existence had sapped my physical strength. It took all my determination. Night had long since fallen when I was ready to accompany Laura to her grave. I went to pick a few wild flowers and scatter them around her face, as the women had done. She was pale, and at peace, looking no more dead than when her heart was still beating and she had lost interest in staying alive.

I began to push the trolley. I had to stop frequently, to remove stones and sweep the ground, it was a slow funeral procession this burial of a woman by the last of the other women. I stopped, leaned over and straightened up again: I remembered the descriptions of pilgrimages I had listened to, of those people who went round churches on their knees, begging forgiveness for their sins. I had never really understood what it was all about, but I sensed that I was participating in a very ancient ritual belonging to that planet from which I had come, and which was so foreign to me.

"There," I said to Laura's corpse when we arrived, "it's almost over."

I picked her up as gently as I could and it bothered me less than touching a living person. She seemed terribly heavy and I found it very difficult to lay her down without jolting her, but I managed it. I did not want to cover her with earth, crush the peaceful face and the white hair which I had carefully smoothed. I slid the big table to the ground and pulled off the legs, then placed the top on the grave. I levelled the earth all around and stepped back: it was a fine, rectangular tomb, clean. No doubt the rain, rare as it was, would bleach the wood, but it would stay put and Laura could quietly turn to dust.

I went to bed. I thought that after all that work, I would sleep like a log, but I was too excited by the idea of my departure. At around three o'clock in the morning, unable to wait a moment longer, I got up, rekindled the fire to heat some water, and began packing. When there had been thirty or forty of us, we always had to take into account the old women, who walked slowly and could not carry much, but I was strong and I decided to take three weeks' worth of supplies, which was more than enough to last me until I came to another bunker. Over the years, we had found six metal gourds, which I filled with water, as rivers were few and far between – it was sometimes several days' walk from one to another. Anthea had told me that meat gave you strength and I had seen, when burying Laura, that my stamina needed building up again. The cans did not contain enough, so I decided to go and get some from the cold store and boil it for a long time so that it would keep.

We had settled five kilometres from a men's prison and we had, as usual, closed the main door, a humble ceremony which we never failed to accomplish. When I had taken out my supplies of meat, I wanted to have a last look at my dead companions of the last ten years. With time, the stench had disappeared, for the air-conditioning was still working, and, as we went from bunker to bunker, I had become used to the sight of now mummified bodies piled haphazardly. However, one caught my eye. He was sitting apart from the others, a long way from the locked door. Had he wanted to cut himself off from the frenzied group which had attacked the lock until their very last breath, or had he died last after having dealt the final blow to those who could stand it no longer but who were unable to stop living, as I had so often done? He had folded a mattress

behind him and two either side, so that he was sitting up very straight, his body firmly supported. He seemed to me to have died proud, holding his head up high, his big eyes staring at the dark passage, with an air of self-respect and defiance. I walked round the cage and went close to him: despite the little left of his face, I had the impression he must have been handsome, the dark beard and withered skin did not mask the beauty of his features. His fists were clenched, resting side by side on his knees, perhaps this was how warriors of the past died, weapon in hand, looking their fate in the eyes. His torso was half clothed in a torn tunic, I could see the powerful bones of a shoulder that must have been strong. I felt a surge of grief, I, who had never known men, as I stood in front of this man who had wanted to overcome fear and despair to enter eternity upright and furious. I sighed and left.

I climbed back up slowly, for I felt a strange nostalgia calling me back. I would never go down into this bunker again. Oh! I would see a hundred others, there were so many of them, but in this one where I had so often come for supplies, I had never taken the trouble to look at the withered corpses, and now one of them affected me. I had not noticed him among his companions, and when I finally did see him, I was about to leave. In another life, I might have met him, he was not very old, he could have been a friend of my father's, or my father himself, for I had definitely had a father. Or even a lover. But all I knew of him was his intention to die with dignity, sitting up straight, of being apart from the others, away from the pushing and shoving, the fears and cries in which the others were caught. He was a loner, like me, a proud man, and I was leaving, knowing nothing of him other than his

final plan. But that at least he had achieved: he had wanted to face his destiny to the last, and someone knew it. As long as I lived, my memory of him would live too, there would be a witness to his pride and solitude. I stopped, hesitated for a moment, then went back down to gaze at him for a long time. There was nothing new to be discovered on his parchment face. I felt a profound sadness, I told myself that that was perhaps how, in the time of the humans, people said goodbye to the body of a much cherished lover, by trying to engrave them completely in their memory. I knew nothing about him, but I knew nothing of myself, except that, one day, I too would die and that, like him, I would prop myself up and remain upright, looking straight ahead until the last, and, when death triumphed over my gaze, I would be like a proud monument raised with hatred in the face of silence.

Reluctantly, I bade him goodbye. Back at the village, I boiled my meat. As I had to keep stoking the fire, I could not go to bed. Dawn was about to break, and I still did not feel sleepy. In the prison, sleeping had been compulsory, and I later discovered that it was necessary for one's well-being and also that it was advisable to keep to the same pattern as everybody else. But I was alone. Nobody was dependent on me any more, and my habits would not disturb anyone. I had complete trust in my body, which would demand sleep when it needed it, so there was no reason for me to go to bed if I did not feel like it. I could leave. I put on my shoes, slung on my rucksack and went out. I did not even need to extinguish the fire, lock up the house, tidy up the few things I was leaving behind. All I had to do was decide which way to go.

I walked towards the rising sun because the sky ahead

was magnificent. There was not a cloud to be seen, and for a long time I had loved to watch the day unfold. I set out at a relaxed, unhurried pace, which I would be able to maintain for a long time. I took my bearings from the landscape and began the trek which I intended to continue as long as I lived, even if I did not know what I expected from it. I walked up the long, gentle slope towards the east, and turned around when I reached the top: I looked at the ten houses in the village which I had so enjoyed building. Behind the biggest one was the cemetery where I had buried Anthea. Only today, I say to myself that what I had felt for her, that trust that slowly built up, that constant preference and that joy each time I was reunited with her after an expedition were probably what the women called love. Now, I had nobody left to love.

From the start, I counted my steps. My heartbeats had been my unit of time, my steps would be my unit of length. I had been told that an average step was seventy centimetres, and that there were a hundred centimetres in a metre. When the women spoke of lengths or distances, it was always in metrès or kilometres, so I tended to use the same concepts. I soon realised that was completely ridiculous: those terms had meaning for them, but not for me, and I no longer needed to use a shared language. An hour's walk: that meant something to me, I did not need to go to the trouble of converting my steps to kilometres. I would evaluate distances in hours' walking. I always relied on my confidence in my inner clock and, during that first day, I decided to count the number of steps I took in one hour and to choose a unit that would be my equivalent of the kilometre. So I had to walk at a very regular pace. The ground was not very hilly, alternating between gentle

descents and moderate inclines which probably made little difference to my speed. My first stop was after five hours: I had counted thirty-seven thousand, seven hundred and forty-two steps. I embarked on a division operation that I now found less difficult since Anthea had shown me how to do it by writing the numbers in the dirt, but all the same it required an enormous effort of concentration. That came out at seven thousand, one hundred and fifty steps an hour. I decided to check by counting hour by hour, and then by fractions of ten minutes, and ended up, by the evening, with the discovery that I walked regularly at a pace of a hundred and nineteen to a hundred and twenty-two steps a minute.

At the same time, I tried to evaluate in advance the distance to a particular point, so as to give myself a sense of distance. The monotonous landscape did not help, and I had to be content with a bush, a small rock or some other insignificant landmark, and sometimes I was not sure whether the bush I was walking past was the one I had selected ten or fifteen minutes earlier or not. But I measured the distance I covered and I could feel myself acquiring a sense of distance, as I had once felt myself acquiring a sense of time.

That first day, in spite of my sleepless night, I walked for ten hours, at my even pace which could take me far, and I decided to stop as soon as I felt that tiredness was slowing me down. I wondered what would make me stop, whether it would be hunger, sleep or boredom: in short, what prompts decisions when you are utterly alone. I was satisfied by this first answer: I wanted to create an internal distance meter, so it was therefore my plan and my determination to carry it out under the right conditions that

governed my decisions. I sat down at the spot where I had felt my pace slacken. I could have gathered a few twigs and branches from the nearest shrubs and lit a fire, but as soon as I had deposited my rucksack on the ground, I realised that I was exhausted and decided to eat my boiled meat without heating it up. True, it was not a very appetising meal, but it was pleasantly seasoned with the feeling of having complete freedom at last. I was able to gauge just how much I had resented having to give in to the other women's wish to settle down, and I smiled to myself as I thought of the immense journey awaiting me. I levelled the ground, stretched out on a blanket folded in half, rolled myself up in the other one and fell asleep at once. After six hours, I woke up, starving, ate again and fell asleep until sunrise. Before setting off again, I went and scattered some earth over the hole where I had relieved myself: then I noticed that I was completely stiff, my ankles, thighs and back ached. I had certainly never walked for such a long time at a stretch. I did not know what to do about it: should I wait and rest, or carry on in the hope that the exercise would relax my muscles? My impatience got the better of me, the prospect of spending a day sitting in the middle of this boring plain seemed ludicrous. But, as I could not rely on the regularity of my speed, I would not try and perfect my distance meter that day.

In the afternoon, the landscape altered slightly. The long undulations became more marked, there were slopes that measured a good ten thousand steps. It would be exaggerating to describe them as hills, but I was very excited at the idea that this change could be the beginning of a hilly area. I wanted to speed up my pace, which seemed even more unreasonable given that, although my aches and pains had

grown no worse, they had not gone away either, and I suspected that I should not be reckless and risk being unable to walk at all. Besides, tiredness got the better of me earlier than the previous day and I did not want to overstretch myself. I was sure that you do not build endurance by pushing yourself beyond your limits. I stopped just before six o'clock in the evening and made a fire. I ate a lot, as much and for as long as I could. Before going to sleep, I rubbed my feet with fat because they were hot. One of the cans contained what the women called bean and bacon casserole, with a layer of lard on top which I removed before heating the rest in my saucepan. I had noticed that when I got this fat on my hands, it softened the skin, and that is what gave me the idea of using it on my feet, and I also put some on my face. I did not fall asleep as quickly as I had done the night before, I had time to watch the sun set and the first stars come out in the pale, smooth sky.

In the middle of the third day, I saw that there was a cabin on the next slope. I had not expected to come across one so soon. I stopped, sat down in the sparse, dry grass to look at my goal from afar. I knew only too well what I would find there, the eternal procession of despair, at the top, the rusty locks, the lights perpetually on, and, down below, the locked prison, the cage and its population of corpses. I would go down, I would look at everything, very closely, the only tribute I was able to pay the victims, and then I would close the main door. I do not know if I still hoped to find an open cage one day, or come across the traces of another group of women or men who had escaped and settled outside, as we had done – only the traces for, as the last survivor from my bunker, I did not

imagine that others would have lived any longer than my companions – I believe I thought about it because I was used to considering all the sides of a question and I had never known any other form of entertainment than that of thinking.

The sun was going down when I set off again. The rest had done me good, I did not ache any more. I estimated that the bunker was half an hour away, and I was pleased to find that I was not mistaken, it took me twenty-eight minutes to reach it. I put my rucksack down inside the cabin and made my way down the stairs without hurrying. There was almost no smell, but I still tried to breathe carefully. For a long time, the women had compared the stench with that of a sewer, of insalubrious marshes or a cesspool – all things which I had not known, for me it was simply the faint smell of corpses. Down below, in the little corridor, the doors were open revealing the usual layout: the guards' room, the cupboard at the back, the big double doors of the prison. I saw a chair had been knocked over, a saucepan had been overturned spilling its contents which had dried up leaving a brown stain: this slight untidiness was rare and aroused my curiosity, but first of all I had to go and see the cage. We had always felt it was an obligation, even when we had become certain that we would never find the door open. We had to pay our respects to the dead, to those twisted bodies that lived there, piled haphazardly, perpetual inhabitants of horror and silence.

They were women. I stared at them for a long time, then I walked around the cage taking in everything: there was nothing new. The knives, forks and plates were still in the cage, revealing that here, when the alarm had sounded, they had been eating. A whip was lying on the floor of the

area where the guards had paced up and down: one of them must have been rather more jumpy than was customary, he had dropped his weapon and perhaps it was he who had knocked over the chair as he fled. The whip was lying against the wall, out of reach of the prisoners who had tried to grab it to the very end: one of them was lying against the bars, her arm still outstretched, overcome by death in her last attempt.

The guards' room contained only the usual things, the chairs, the table, the lockers. Those people left absolutely nothing behind. Anthea had often expressed her surprise to me, but I did not really understand: I had nothing, and I could not imagine the objects she told me about: books, letters, cigarettes, playing cards, razors. I travelled with two blankets, a small shovel, a tin-opener, matches and food, and so I did not find it surprising that the guards only had their clothes and their weapons. I righted the chair, sat down and felt sad. I had not wanted to look at the dead women. I had forced myself to, and, apart from the one with her arm outstretched, I had not really seen them. In fact, I told myself that I had been hypocritical and, as I had nobody to lie to, I discovered that you can lie to yourself, which I found very odd. So was I missing companionship more than I thought, and making myself into another, a witness, if only to deceive her? I mulled this thought over for a long time, but I could not see how to develop it further. I was as much a prisoner in the open air of this empty land as I had been in the cage during my early years. I abandoned this futile avenue and resumed my usual train of thought, which was always to plan, to assess, to organise, and I went to investigate the food store. It was the only thing that varied from one bunker to the next, as if

deliveries had comprised large quantities of the same thing and the choice of how these were used was left up to the guards. In the cold store, I found large pieces of beef which I would have to defrost before I could cut them up. There was no pork or mutton left. In the cupboard were several tins of powdered milk, which I was thrilled with, it was at least three years since I had last had any, and I knew that it was a very nourishing food which would help build up my strength. I was interested in some other tins of powder. At that time, my reading was very poor and I found it hard to decipher the labels. When I managed to do so, I was puzzled by the word "orange". Of course, I had heard the women say it and I gradually recalled that it was with nostalgia for one of the good things of the past. I diluted a little of the powder in water and tasted it with curiosity: I found it rather bitter, it needed sugar, but I rarely had any. However, Anthea had told me about vitamins and I took the tins thinking that they would improve my diet.

I made several trips down into the bunker to bring up the meat, the powders, a mattress and a chair. I cooked a copious meal and I had the brainwave of sprinkling my mixture of meat and vegetables with milk. After that, I slept for a long time. On awakening, I realised that there was nothing more for me to do here. I felt vaguely disappointed, as if I had hoped for more from this bunker, as if I had forgotten that they were all the same. The next one would also have the door locked, but I would be unlikely to find more milk there. Perhaps there would be some other novelty: the women had talked of chocolate, bread, cheese. I was looking for something else. I told myself that, while waiting to find out what it was, for I was modest to the point of not thinking "before finding it", I would enjoy

the lovely red meat that I could grill over my fire of twigs, and also the milk, of which I drank a whole gourd full.

At around eight o'clock in the morning, I felt wonderfully good. I went down into the bunker to fetch a few cans to replace the ones I had used in the last few days and to see if I could find some thread, which I had forgotten to do the day before. By the time I was ready to leave, my rucksack weighed a lot more than when I had arrived, but it did not feel too heavy, I was already a lot stronger. I wanted to take the mattress with me, for I had slept much better than on the ground, but I told myself I should be careful, and that there would be plenty of time to think about that in a few days, at the next bunker, when I had completely adjusted to my new life. Perhaps I would no longer need it.

I did not leave the usual signs on the ground: I no longer believed there might be any other survivors. But I discarded the mattress in front of the cabin so that if I came that way again, I would recognise my own traces.

I think I have given an accurate account of this first bunker: I think so, but I cannot be certain. I am sure that was the one where I found milk, but afterwards, which one was it where I found tea? The fifth? The tenth? They were all the same, with their forty mummified corpses piled up or lying scattered on the floor; only once did I find thirty-eight, and only once did I find all the women lying calmly, as if they had understood that death was inevitable and had decided to wait in silence. Another time, the keys had fallen within two metres of the bars and I thought for a long time how dreadful it must have been to see them without being able to reach them. Sometimes, a tap was running in the cage, making a little lapping sound that made me jump

when I heard it, but I had already lost all hope that the door would be open. Each time, there was the food store and the perpetual light. I went from one bunker to another, carrying my provisions, travelling eastwards, and in the end, I never did take a mattress. My shoes wore out, which did not bother me, I was sure to find some boots to fit me eventually. Then came the season when the sky is always cloudy, with the fine drizzle that I knew well, and I was glad to find a waterproof sheet in one of the guard rooms. It was folded on the table, beside a pile of new blankets which had not been put away. That set me thinking again about how rare it was to find unusual objects in the bunkers, as if it had been decreed that they all had to be absolutely identical. I was about to plunge into my habitual speculation about the guards and the meaning of our imprisonment and, at first, I felt like shrugging and turning my thoughts to other things. But why? How else would I occupy my mind? After our escape, Dorothy used to say: "Let's organise our life, let's not waste our thoughts." In fact, I could use them as I pleased, the idea of wasting them was absurd. My survival was guaranteed, I would never exhaust all the food available and the rare bad weather had never made me ill: I could allow my mind to wander as it pleased, it did not matter if the paths it took were dead ends, all I had to do was leave them. It was certain that the purpose of our deportation and imprisonment would never be revealed to me through the abandoned objects, and the whip lying on the ground taught me nothing useful. I found the same thing in all the bunkers, even in the guards' quarters.

Even in the guards' quarters: I do not think I had ever formulated that so clearly. Those words kept haunting me

and were beginning to annoy me, when at last the idea began to form: we had understood that the guards did not want to give us any clues as to the purpose of our imprisonment and our being kept alive, but we had always assumed that they knew. Supposing they were as much in the dark as we were? Supposing they were forced to do a job which they were not allowed to understand? Supposing that by putting the same things in all the bunkers, those in charge wanted to keep all information from them as well as from us? I was electrified by this theory, I could feel my footsteps dancing and I began to laugh. I was perfectly aware that I had only added another question to all the others, but it was new, and that, in the absurd world in which I lived, and still do live, was happiness.

I would be the sole proprietor of this land, I had said to Anthea shortly before she died: but I knew that the stones and the cold stores would constitute a paltry treasure. I had set out with the intention of discovering: perhaps things, the famous power station which the women had always talked about, the place from which the orders that governed our lives were issued, anything that was new, and to think that the guards knew nothing was a new idea, nothing seemed to me more precious. I would have liked to celebrate. As I lived as I pleased, walking, eating and sleeping when I felt like it, I could not invent anything special, but that evening, I lit the fire and grilled my meat with a light heart. I promised myself sweet dreams that night. I do not know if I had them. Every night, I had plenty of company, and, on awakening, I always had the vague recollection that I had been laughing and playing with women and men, but I never managed to remember

anything more specific. That always amazes me, for when I am awake, I forget nothing.

Having realised that, in fact, the guards were just another kind of victim, I was prepared for the strange encounter that awaited me. I had been walking for a year, always towards the rising sun. The landscape had changed a little, the long undulations had become hills, and I never climbed them without hope. The rivers were deeper, it was possible to swim in them, which gave me immense pleasure, and I saw new species in the thicker woods. I carefully examined the bushes, for I remember that the women had spoken of wild berries, strawberries, blackberries and raspberries, which all tasted delicious, but I never saw anything that resembled their descriptions. Once, I came across what I thought must be mushrooms, but I did not pick them because they had said that they might be poisonous. It was on leaving one of these woods that I was struck by the lie of the land.

A long valley stretched out ahead, covered with the usual scrawny vegetation and loose stones, but I could immediately make out a band of ground that looked different: the grass was even sparser, there were virtually no stones. It formed a straight trail to the next hilltop. The women had spoken of roads: was this one? I went down and met this sort of path, deciding of course to follow it, even if it was not heading eastwards, since I had only chosen this direction to avoid going round in circles. I walked for a day and a half before reaching the top of a long, low hill: as soon as I looked down, I saw the bus.

I say bus: it is obvious that, at first, I did not understand what I was looking at. First of all, it was half-an-hour away, all I could make out was a rectangular shape in the middle

of the plain; then, of course, I had never seen a bus, all I had to go by was what the women had told me, and none of them had tried to give me precise descriptions of things which they took for granted. I only knew that it was a vehicle that could carry a lot of people.

My heart was racing while I ran down so fast that I was at the bottom in ten minutes. I stumbled a couple of times, for I could not take my eyes off my goal: a huge rusty structure, which was ten paces long and twice my height, standing on wheels that were mostly broken, with windows all around. As soon as I was half-way down, I could see the figures sitting in the bus, and I nearly stopped dead in my tracks, but I quickly got a grip on myself. I ran up to it, dropped my rucksack and stood rooted to the spot, trying to take in what I saw. I recognised a door with a handle, and I tried to turn it, but it came off in my hand. The panes were broken, I tugged at the frame, the door opened and immediately dropped off its hinges. I hauled myself up what remained of the steps and entered the bus.

Over the years, the corpses in the bunkers had mummified; these had become skeletons, dressed in the all-too-familiar uniform, equipped with their weapons and strange masks which hid the facial bones. They were sitting naturally, as if death had struck very suddenly and they had slipped, without being in the least aware of their last heartbeat, into that final immobility where, for years, nothing had disturbed them. The driver was in his seat, his hands still gripping the wheel as they had been doing when he had died. On entering the bus, I had raised a light cloud of dust which settled around me as I stood there dumbfounded. I mechanically did what I had been doing for years and which had become the very structure

of my mind, I began to count. I enumerated twenty-two passengers on the twenty-four seats, sitting in pairs either side of a central gangway. So there were twenty-three bodies. Each one had a kit bag, either on his knees, or on the floor between his feet. Incredulously I made a careful check: there was no sign of panic, nothing suggested that they had been forewarned of any danger. The bus had stopped in the middle of the plain and everybody had died on the spot.

I stood for a long time looking around me, as I allowed my wild curiosity to satisfy itself at its own pace. I already knew that it would remain frustrated – I could count myself lucky if this bizarre world that I inhabited was kind enough to add a few questions to my list of unanswered questions. It was five o'clock and the sun had begun its descent before I was stirred into action.

My interest was primarily in the kit bags: I had explored more than a hundred bunkers but I had never seen these bags made of coarse, stiff cloth, with straps and metal buckles. I took one. Impatience got the better of me while I was taking it outside, I was tense, my heart was beating furiously. I tried to calm myself down, warning myself that I would not find anything extraordinary, but I did not believe myself and my fingers trembled as I undid the knots.

On top was a carefully folded garment, of a kind I had never seen: it had long sleeves, a stiff collar, a belt, and it was not cut from fabric I had seen before, but from a thick material which was fairly supple, with creases, pockets, flat seams – the word came back to me at once – and padded parts. I was used to light cotton that fluttered in the slightest breeze and I thought this must be

uncomfortable to wear. It was probably a jacket, a garment the women had mentioned but which the men had never worn in the bunker.

Underneath, there were several items. I began with a smaller packet, made of thick paper. Obviously, I did not know it was paper, because I had never seen any, but I shall not go into the difficulties I had in recognising and naming all these things, for it would be too tedious and I would not enjoy it, I would have to repeat myself over and over again. I undid the packet carefully, it was fragile and threatened to fall apart: it only contained a brownish dust, odourless and tasteless, probably some sort of food that had dried up. Then, from a small soft leather pouch, I took out a strange instrument that I had to examine closely to find a very thin blade sandwiched between two metal plates, all mounted on a handle that was very easy to hold. You could not use it for cutting unless you removed the blade: it took me a long time to guess that it was a razor. The third item was a glass bottle, which I put to one side, for I was much more intrigued by two pieces of carefully folded, thick, supple fabric, big white rectangles: I thought they must be those towels made of terry cloth that the women missed so badly and which I had learned to manage without. But I could use them to make myself something to replace my tattered dress. There were also two pairs of knickers. I remembered later that for men, the word underpants was used.

And underneath, a book.

Anthea had taught me the alphabet and the rudiments of reading by drawing the letters in the sand. At the time, it bored her, for she could not see what I would do with such knowledge, but I had insisted: there was too little to

learn for me not to take everything. I had words in my head for things I had never seen, let alone touched, as I was now doing. I recognised the book at once and I was so overwhelmed that I felt almost giddy. I think that if I had been standing, I would have collapsed. I had in my hands the most precious of treasures, a spring from which to drink the knowledge of that world to which I would never have access. As always when I was overcome by emotion, I began to count: the title, written large, had twenty-three letters divided into four words, all beginning with capital letters. I looked, without trying to decipher – excitement, impatience and tiredness were a bad mixture which made me tense and stupid. I no longer knew which way to turn, whether to satisfy my curiosity and search the bags or to find out what the book was about, and I had to make an enormous effort to control myself. As the sun was already very low and soon I would not be able to see enough, I decided to save the book for later, but my excitement made me clumsy and I dropped the bottle that had been in my lap. It was sheer luck that it did not break, as it landed on the jacket and I was able to catch it before it rolled onto the stones. That calmed me down and I resolutely put the book to one side. I returned to the bag and was disappointed, the only other thing it contained was a blanket like the ones in the bunkers. So I picked up the bottle: it was not big, probably half a litre, full of a colourless liquid, like water, and had never been opened. I examined the cork at length and put off finding a way to open it until later: I was absolutely exhausted. The regular existence I led, walking for eight to ten hours every day in the wilderness, had not prepared me for this emotional assault, I was trembling with fatigue and I did not even

have the strength to make myself something to eat. I unfolded the blanket from the bag, stretched it out on the ground to air it and wrapped myself up in my own. I did not even realise that I was falling asleep, and was astonished, on waking suddenly, to find it was three o'clock in the morning. I lit the fire and heated up some food. At sunrise, I was back in the bus.

First, I took out all the kit bags and lined them up a few paces from the rusty shell of the bus, then I did likewise with the corpses. Reduced as they were to skeletons, they felt incredibly light. I was especially interested in their clothing. I wondered whether the lightweight cotton trousers and the shirt with epaulettes that I had seen the guards in the bunker wearing would be more comfortable than my dress. One of the dead men had been small and slim, I decided to keep his clothes and would try them on after washing them. I put the weapons in two piles: the whips that would never crack again and the big pistols that they had never drawn in the bunker, but whose use I had been told about. I was tempted to try them out, and took one, aimed and pulled the trigger: nothing happened, and at the time, I told myself it was not loaded. Later, I remembered that those things had a safety catch and I thought that perhaps it was on, but in any case, I would not have known how to release it. Then I began searching all the bags and I was not surprised to find exactly the same in each one: a jacket, two pairs of underpants, a packet of food – one, better preserved than the others, contained little whitish fragments which crumbled at my touch: I presumed it was bread, that everyday food which I had never eaten – a blanket, a razor and a book. I did not even need to decipher the title to realise that they were all the

same. I did not dwell on the matter, fearing I would again experience that agitation which had defeated me the previous evening. As I finished sorting everything out, I wondered why we had never found any bread in any of the bunkers. I still have no idea.

By midday, everything was in order, the twenty-three skeletons lying side by side, the shirts and underpants in neat piles, the masks and weapons in three separate heaps. I had examined the masks closely, and remembered stories told by the women: they were probably gas masks. That made me wonder what had killed these men: certainly not gas, against which they had protection. Anyway, we had escaped a few minutes after the siren had stopped and nothing had happened to us.

I stood up and stretched, my back ached from bending over for so long, and I spent a long time examining my possessions before heating up my meal. I was suddenly the owner of a vast number of goods and I was used to owning nothing. I felt overwhelmed. I ate gazing at my skeletons. They had been guards of the absurd, ensuring that orders were carried out whose purpose they were unaware of, themselves having to submit to incomprehensible rules, and perhaps they had no more idea of our identity than we did of theirs. Death had taken them by surprise, sitting in the bus: but had they known where they were going? Since the siren, we had never found any trace of the guards, and we had thought that they had all been taken off somewhere else: why were these guards still here? The only possible explanations I could think of occurred to me much later: they were on a routine trip between two bunkers, they were on their way to sleep, or they might have been new arrivals being driven to their post, unaware

of the danger. The gas masks showed that this land was not safe, but whatever it was that killed them had been unforeseen. Ours was the only prison where the siren had sounded just as the cage door was open and that had saved us: they were the only ones who were exposed, and that had killed them. This symmetry preoccupied me for a long time, for some reason I found in it a sort of obscure beauty. Did something, someone, somewhere understand the meaning of all this? And were things still going on? And on this planet of which I will only ever see a fraction, however long I keep walking, was there a place where the bunkers were still operational? where men and women obeyed the whip, slept and ate at random times, and where a rebellious girl was beginning to count her heartbeats? Was I the only one? Did the planet on which I was wandering have a thousand sister planets scattered across the starry sky and, at night, when I was waiting to fall asleep, and my gaze sometimes lit on some distant globe, was the same scene taking place there?

I decided to bury the skeletons, for I wanted to show that whatever had happened to us, we belonged to the same kind, to those who honour the dead. I dug twenty-three shallow graves and laid the skeletons in them, then I covered them with earth and made a little mound on each one, on which I placed the masks and the weapons. I arranged them in a circle, I don't know why, I felt that was best, their heads in the centre and their feet pointing towards the distance. It took me three days, for the ground was dry and I found it tiring. I rested by trying to decipher my books.

They were all carrying the same book: *A Condensed Gardening Handbook*. It explained how to plant, sow, thin

out, hoe and weed, and what to do in which season and what to plant where. I read the whole book carefully and became – that made me laugh – an expert on grafting roses. There were lots of illustrations which showed me what a hoe looked like, a tulip bulb and plenty of other things that I had never seen and never would.

I read and reread the book. I acquired a perfectly useless knowledge, but I enjoyed it. I felt as if I had embellished my mind and that made me think of jewels, those objects which women used to adorn their beauty, in the days when beauty had a purpose.

On the fifth day, everything was in order. I had chosen two pairs of trousers, two shirts, a jacket, several pairs of underpants, taken as many towels as possible and replaced the rest, neatly folded and wrapped in the blankets, on the seats of the bus. I repacked my rucksack, which was only a little heavier because I had eaten the contents of many of the cans, when suddenly I caught sight of the bottles which I had completely forgotten. Had I become so rich that I could neglect some of my possessions? I had to move on because my water supply was getting low and I needed to find a river or a bunker soon to replenish it, but I could take a little time to find out what was in the bottles. I had no implement to open them with, so I began digging out the cork with the tip of my knife, which was difficult and took a long time. At last, I was able to pour a little of the liquid into my cup. It smelled funny, very strong and not very pleasant to the nostrils. I dipped my finger in and licked it: I did not like it. I took a tiny sip, which I swallowed gingerly, but even so it burned my throat and made me want to cough: so it was alcohol, as I had been expecting. First of all I was vexed, then I remembered that alcohol

has medicinal qualities, it was used in the past especially for cleaning wounds and for numbing the senses when someone was in a great deal of pain. My wounds, nothing more serious than scratches on my legs when I brushed past thorn bushes, never became infected. All the same, it seemed like a good idea to take one bottle. I put the others back inside the bus.

Before leaving, I gazed at the scene I was leaving behind: the bus eaten away by rust, a shell in the middle of the plain which would slowly disintegrate over the centuries where it stood, the tombs in a circle decorated with the masks and weapons, the silence barely disturbed by the perpetual whispering of the wind. All that seemed incredibly strange, sinister and moving. I felt the burden of the inexplicable, of my life, of this world to which I was the sole witness. I had nothing else to do in it but continue my journey. One day, I would die here. Like the guards.

I followed the road.

It had not been used for twenty years and in places, despite the sparse vegetation, it was so overgrown that it disappeared and I had to climb a little hill to make out the bare strip. It took me towards the south-west. I wondered whether it would take me to something. That would be logical, if there was any logic in this world. In the bus, two seats had remained empty: was the driver on his way to pick up three more guards, one of whom would have to stand, or was he driving the others to their final destination?

For three days, ten hours a day, I walked, once again spurred on by impatience. I had stayed in one place for a long time, and I was reaching the end of my supplies when I saw a cabin. I went in, feeling no emotion, certain that

I would only find, as usual, the lights on, the main doors open and the cage locked. In the cold store, I was glad to see a fairly small piece of lamb that would defrost and cook quite fast. Back at the top, I realised that I had not even glanced at the cage and its occupants. That made my heart sink, and I promised to go and pay my respects the next day.

That night, I had a dream that I remembered. In it, I was sitting inside the bus, amid the guards, who were alive. I could not make out their faces because of the masks, but I could hear them talking among themselves. In fact, I had never heard the sound of a man's voice, but that did not occur to me in my dream. The bus was moving. My situation felt completely natural, I did not wonder where I was going, or what I was doing among the guards. This seemed to go on for ages, I was perfectly relaxed, sitting among the men, when suddenly I rediscovered the exquisite eruption of before, when I used to make up stories that I kept to myself.

That woke me. I was alone, under my blanket, lying in the middle of the plain, a few paces from the cabin. I felt an immense sadness as I thought that there had been men, that their closeness could trigger that delicious tremor and that I was reduced, poor me! to encountering it by chance in a dream. For a few moments I wondered what gave me my determination to live, I thought of all those women who had been killed by despair well before they reached old age, of Laura who grew tired of keeping her soul tied to her body, and I felt a sort of vague temptation, a gnawing urge to admit defeat, which terrified me. I got up and took a few steps. It was a clear night, the sky was vast, hill after hill, I had thousands of

kilometres to cover. My curiosity, momentarily dampened, was reawakened.

The next day, I went back down the stairs and sat outside the cage. It was one of the few bunkers where the occupants had maintained their dignity to the end. There were no gruesome piles of twisted bodies, they were lying down, each on his own mattress, as if sleeping. Perhaps one of them had had a powerful influence over the others and had convinced them that shouting and terror would achieve nothing, that they had to resign themselves to dying and welcome their fate without putting up a futile struggle. Everything was in order: but, apart from bodies lying everywhere, how can you create disarray when you have nothing? I felt a sort of serenity looking at those corpses: they had died calmly and would spend eternity in tranquil postures. It set me wondering how I would die, whether it would be at night, in my sleep, and I would lie on the plain for ever, exposed to the constant gentle wind, or whether I would fall ill and have to endure pain. I remembered the guns, and then I thought of the safety catch, and told myself I should have persevered, I would have been bound to find out how to use it, for I might end up wanting to die. I could have gone back to the bus, but I was extremely reluctant to retrace my steps when there was so much new ground ahead. I was young and healthy, and I had plenty of time to worry about that kind of precaution. Besides, I expected to make new discoveries. There had to be more than just cabins on this plain!

I filled one of the big cooking pots with water and boiled my washing for a long time on the guards' cooker. When it looked clean, I took it up and laid it out on the grass to dry in the sun. It took me the whole day.

I set off again. Now that I had books, and could learn to read, I was sorry not to have a pencil or anything else to write with, to make a note of my route. In the evening, before going to sleep, I practised writing letters in the dirt, copying the sentences and words from the book. I had used a lot of them in speech, so I recognised them, and I thought about how to construct those that were not in there. The first one I tried to spell was "cabin": I had "ca" from "can" and "bin" from "compost bin" – I just had to put the two together to make "cabin". Then I spelled "cage". The magic "e" made the "a" say its own name, unlike the short "a" in "cabin". I felt very pleased with myself for working this out and it looked as though I remembered everything I had been taught.

Sometimes, busying myself in this way, I automatically spoke the words I was trying to write and I was astonished at the sound of my voice: it had become cracked and raucous. I was probably forgetting how to talk through lack of practice. That worried me a little, then I shrugged: so what if I completely forgot how to speak? I would never talk to anyone again!

All the same, I felt nostalgic for a moment. That wonderful dream never recurred, and I was sometimes acutely aware that I was alone, and always would be, and that the only pleasure within my grasp was the all too rare one of satisfied curiosity.

I continued from bunker to bunker. In so far as there were seasons on this planet where things varied so little, winter returned. It was slightly cooler and it often rained during the night: I slept wrapped in the waterproof sheet and I set out a little later in the morning, for I had to wait for it to dry. I wore trousers and the jacket. While waiting

for better weather, when I was not working on my books, I made myself a dress from the towels. The ground became greener and the streams deeper. I lost the road.

It had become harder and harder to follow. At first, I told myself I must have made a mistake and confused it with the natural formation of the land. Much as I disliked doing so, I retraced my steps. I thought I had found it again at the top of a hill, and I scanned the countryside carefully. The direction I had come from seemed to be the right one, so I went back the same way, hoping that I had only missed it through a lapse of concentration. I waited for the low evening sunlight, which emphasised the ups and downs of the landscape, and I saw the thin ribbon stretching up the hill opposite. At dawn the next day, I could make out further clues, but after an hour's walking, I could no longer see any clear signs. I decided to cover a vast semi-circular area with a radius of five thousand steps. For three days, I walked back and forth, and had to resign myself to the fact that it ended there.

I was bitterly disappointed. I had so hoped that it would lead me somewhere, I had forgotten that, in this wilderness, nothing made sense. Do people build roads that suddenly vanish? Yes, I told myself, yes, these people did. I felt like sitting down on the ground and weeping, but, luckily, my anger was the stronger and drove me on. I had to choose a new direction. At first I had chosen the east, then the road had made me deviate towards the south-west, and now I decided to go due south.

I had less energy. The road and the bus, which had given me so much hope, had turned out to be insoluble enigmas like everything else, and from time to time I said to myself that it was a pretty meagre reward after two years' walking.

But gradually my natural resilience took over again and, as I made my way from one hilltop to another, it occurred to me to organise my route more cleverly than in a straight line. By going straight, I was only exploring a very narrow area, and perhaps I was missing things to the left or right. The fruitless semi-circle gave me an idea: I would walk in huge parallel arcs, two or three hours' walk apart, depending on how I felt and the appeal of the terrain. Of course, that was much harder to calculate than going straight ahead, when all I had to do was pick out the landmarks and walk towards them. I knew that if you follow the sun, you go round in a circle. I got involved in complicated reckonings and experiments in the field: I needed to follow the sun for a while and change direction at midday. At that time, I had no means of making a map of my journey, but in the evening, I drew it on the ground with stones, and I gazed at it for a long time to ensure I had memorised it. I began to wonder whether the bunkers were dotted around at random, or whether their location was governed by a plan. On our first exploratory trip, it had been twenty-six days before we found one, but sometimes I walked for barely a week before being able to stock up afresh. I walked in several semi-circles, then, when I was certain I could orientate myself as I pleased, I made big zigzags along the arcs of the circle: after a few weeks, I realised that the bunkers were arranged in groups of five, one at each corner of a rectangle and one in the centre. By keeping to a straight line, I obviously missed some. I soon became able, on arriving at a cabin, to work out which way to go to find the next one, and could go to them or avoid them as I chose. I never avoided them and, whether I needed food or not, I went down to

pay my respects to the dead. I never came across an open prison door.

The coincidence that had made the siren go off at the precise moment when the guard was putting his key in the lock had been unique. Sometimes I marvel at my fate: I had been the only child among the women, and we were the prisoners who had escaped with our lives. For a few years.

This new control over my route dispelled the melancholy mood that had been haunting me. After all, I had made one discovery, so why the hell had I allowed it to make me depressed? There would be more.

I made another discovery.

It was at the end of the day. I was tired and was looking for a patch of ground that would be a good place to stop. It had rained for several nights, and that evening the sky was cloudless, so I could rely on dry weather, which was extremely pleasant for I had not been able to light a fire and had eaten my canned food cold and congealed. I needed a thick grove where I would find plenty of wood to cut, in other words, with as few brambles as possible. I looked carefully about me, but with a specific objective, which nearly caused me to miss the mound of stones. I had almost gone past it when the feeling of something unusual made me stop. I turned round and saw the mound that stood out so sharply in the monotony of the plain. There were never piles! It was two paces wide and reached almost to my knees. I had never seen anything like it, at most a few large stones close to each other, but what I saw here could not be natural. I took off my rucksack, placed it slowly on the ground, catching my breath.

I was almost afraid to start moving them, I had to rouse

myself. The stones were fairly large, I could only pick up one at a time, and I realised that I was likely to graze my hands. I tore off a strip from the blanket and wrapped it around my hands, which slowed me down, but something inside me found it a relief: I was terribly afraid of being disappointed and finding, after all that effort, nothing but a few shade-loving insects. The pile was artificial, there was absolutely no doubt about that. If it concealed nothing, I would have to ask myself why someone had made it and all I would have gained would be a new question, that worthless treasure which was beginning to weary me. This world was like a jigsaw puzzle, I only had a few pieces which did not fit together. Once, Anthea had explained this game to me and I thought I would have enjoyed it.

I concentrated on removing the stones evenly from the top of the pile to avoid a rock slide. It took a long time. It took me more than an hour to reach the last layer of stones, which were much smaller and in the shape of a circle. I took the shovel which I used every evening to level the ground before lying down and began to scrape the ground carefully. I was on my knees, like the pilgrims of the past, and certainly trembling like one. The shovel soon struck a metal surface.

Ah! My whole being leaped! An intense tremor rippled through me and my head was spinning. I stood still for a few moments, regaining my breath, stunned and almost afraid. I put down the shovel and bandaged my hands again to remove the last stones. Drops of perspiration fell from my forehead and I was trembling with impatience, but I continued to work slowly and methodically. In three minutes, everything was clear: in front of me was a round metal cover, two paces in diameter, with a slightly rusty

handle set off-centre. I picked up a screwdriver to free and raise it. Was I going to have to lift this heavy-looking plate? I was confused and almost in despair, telling myself that I probably would not have the strength, but tugged at the handle just in case. I felt something move, I tugged again and discovered that the plate rotated on a horizontal axis, stiffly, and scraping, but requiring no more strength than I had. It rose up, surrounded by a rim of steel, and I saw, at a depth of half a pace, a small platform on which I could stand. I lowered myself in gingerly, my hands on the edges. As soon as I had gained a foothold, I realised that I was on the top step of a very narrow spiral staircase that was unlit. At that time, I had never experienced the profound darkness of enclosed spaces, for the light never went out in the bunkers, but the women had spoken of switches. I felt the wall: they hadn't given a precise description, but I thought they must be small objects positioned near doors. I began groping my way down the stairs and when I reached the third step I felt something small and smooth with a button. I pressed: a huge light came on, just at my feet. The wall was grey, rough like the walls in the bunkers, but the staircases were never spiral like this, and you could not control the light. I continued my descent, hurrying at first, but I think I had only got to about the tenth step when I started feeling dizzy. I stopped, and, despite my impatience, forced myself to wait a few minutes until this kind of giddiness passed. As soon as I started moving again, it returned. Later, I was able to run up and down it, but that first time, even though I was consumed with curiosity, I had to stop several times. There were eighty open-work metal steps. At last I saw the floor, made of the same rough material as the walls. One last turn and I was

at the bottom, in a corridor that was six or seven paces wide and twelve paces long, lined from top to bottom with shelves laden with cans, bottles and packets of all kinds, and closed at the end by a door of a very strange material that I had not seen before. It opened easily: I saw a big square room, which was not grey and gloomy like the bunkers, the walls were entirely covered with a beautiful wood with a dark sheen, and the floor was soft underfoot. I understood that, for the first time in my life, I was about to walk on carpet. Lamps at various points in the room gave off a warm light, which fell in brighter puddles on a big table, and there were wide, low chairs which I recognised at once as the kind of object that used to be called armchairs. I was choked with admiration. I had never seen anything so beautiful, because I had never seen anything beautiful that was the work of a human hand. I had seen the beauty of the sky, the changing shapes of the clouds, softly falling rain, I had seen the slowly moving stars, and a few flowers: here, I saw furniture, paintings hanging on the walls, vases, a little carving – but I should not be describing these things so precisely, because that first moment I saw only the interplay of lines, shapes and harmonious colours, an unfathomable configuration that completely overwhelmed me, and brought tears to my eyes because of the feeling of calm and tranquillity that reminded me of the singing of the women, in the past, when it rose up over the plain. The colours were beautifully in tune with each other, and harmonised with the volumes and dimensions of the room. I was still giddy from the descent, and I crouched down because I felt as though I might fall over. After a few minutes, I thought it would be a good idea to close my eyes, the giddiness had not gone, it was even getting worse.

I rested my head on my folded arms. I breathed deeply and did something I had not done for years, I began counting my heartbeats. This recourse to a very old habit seemed to soothe me. All the same, more than an hour went by before I could calmly begin exploring my new kingdom. I tried several times to raise my head and open my eyes, but I was immediately overcome with emotion, I had to curl up in a ball again and wait, patiently, for the storm to subside.

I was confronted with the human past, in a place that had been designed for the pleasure of the person who would live there. It was completely different from the bunkers. I had only known the prisons, the instruments that served basic needs, the whips and straw mattresses which had to be piled up so that we could move around. But this secret underground place was a home.

I have never changed anything in the way this room is arranged; each time I use an object, I put it back in exactly the same place. There were three chairs on either side of the table on which stood a lamp with a beautiful ochre lampshade, and a large clear glass dish. Away from the table, there were three armchairs around another, lower table, and a big bed with a colourful bedspread on which several cushions were casually scattered. When I was able to look around, I saw, on my right, what must have been the kitchen: a sink, hot-plates and a cupboard, which contained saucepans and white china plates with a blue floral pattern. One of the taps provided hot water, and the other cold. To the left of the sink was a door unlike anything I had ever seen, a single wooden door painted white, which opened into a much smaller room, with a toilet, a washbasin and a bathtub.

When I had examined everything, I sat on one of the chairs, and then in an armchair. I began to laugh. It had taken more than two hours for my amazement and emotion to turn to joy.

There was so much to investigate, taking it all in was so thrilling that I had not yet realised that one of the ornaments on the wall was a shelf laden with books. My head started spinning again, and I stood staring across the room at them for ages. I had read and reread my gardening handbook and knew it by heart. I could feel my eyes widening before this gift and to get over the shock, I began to count: there were nineteen books, eight of which were very fat, about three fingers wide. I went over to them: titles were printed on the spines and, at first, I was so intimidated that I tried to decipher them from a distance, and thought I had forgotten how to read. I raised my hand and took one – it seemed astonishingly heavy, then I went and sat down and stood it up on its edge. On it was written: *Elementary Treatise on Astronautics.* I opened it. The pages were full of words and strange signs among which I recognised the few symbols that Anthea had taught me: plus, minus, multiply by, divide by and equals. I think it was only fatigue that made me wise enough not to go any further that evening. Afterwards, I discovered that some of the others were more in-depth studies on the same subject. I have read them all, every single word. I did not understand a thing.

Do I understand Shakespeare's plays any better, or the story of Don Quixote de la Mancha, or what is going on in Dostoevsky's novels? I do not think so. They all speak of experiences that I have not known: I think I do better with objects – it took me hours to work out how to use a corkscrew and open a bottle of wine, but I managed

it – feelings remain a mystery to me. It is perhaps because the sensations associated with them are foreign to me, or because they repel me as did physical contact which seems to be so important in love. Whenever I think of Anthea's death and the effort it took to hold her in my arms, it brings tears to my eyes. I try to imagine myself being warm: there is always a point when the whip cracks. A lot of things that the women used to tell me about still puzzle me: I know that there used to be such a thing as money, that everything had to be bought and that they always found it odd to go and stock up from the cold stores without having to pay anybody, but it remained rather abstract and I cannot really understand why people kill for money like poor old Raskolnikov. It is true that I have killed, but to relieve my companions' suffering, and I always had the impression that they were grateful to me. But perhaps I should not be so certain: my ignorance of human feelings is so vast that they might have hated me without my being aware of it, if they did not tell me. Nor do I understand why it is humiliating to wear second-hand clothing: I have rarely worn anything else! I loved Rose's songs, I expect I would have appreciated music more than literature: if there are recordings in the house and the equipment to play them, I have not recognised them.

I realised that five hours had gone by since, up above, I had felt tired and decided to stop, then noticed the mound of stones. I was hungry. I opened one of the cans and ate the contents cold. I supposed that the hot-plates were working perfectly, like the lamps, but I had had enough shocks, I was exhausted and I did not even want to try them. I unfolded my blanket and laid it on the carpet, putting off using the bed until later. After the whirlwind of

emotions, I thought I would sleep for a long time: but the excitement was too much, I awoke with a jump and was starving again after three hours. I went into the kitchen and boiled some water in a pretty little saucepan. The door of the cold store was to the right of the sink, and I was astonished to find a room that was even bigger than the one in the bunkers, crammed to the ceiling with all sorts of meats, but also vegetables and fruit. Each bag had been carefully labelled: there were foods that I had heard of, but which were not to be found in the bunkers, like chicken, venison and roebuck, powdered eggs, tomatoes, parsley, cheese and hundreds of other delicacies which I have since become familiar with. And bread, which delighted me especially. I decided to have a party, with a chicken which I sprinkled with herbs, tomatoes, potato croquettes and strawberry jam spread on bread and butter. I put everything out to defrost in the kitchen. Later, I found out how to use a sort of oven which enabled you to reheat food in a few seconds, but this time, I had to wait several hours. I was so busy that the time flew by. I ran a scalding bath and for the first time I experienced the luxury that the women had so missed. Later, it became something quite mundane and it was only on my return from expeditions that I rediscovered the magic of immersing myself in deliciously hot water in which I liked to fall asleep. There were bars of soap. Of course, everything was new to me and required long periods of thought: the bar of soap had me puzzled. I was amazed by its scent, which was so unusual for me who had known no other smells than those of the grasses, the few wild flowers and the earth after the rain. I tasted it and pulled a face, it was certainly not something to eat, then I recalled things the women had told me and I

rubbed it on my hands, but that was no use, for I had not realised that you had to wet them first. Finally, I got there and I used soap to wash my hair. When it was dry, I was amazed to find it so light and flowing, framing my face so graciously.

I nearly forgot! Of course, one of the most astonishing discoveries was the mirror. I had never seen myself. Anthea had told me that I was pretty, but that meant nothing to me, and still did not. All the same, I was fascinated, and spent hours looking at myself. I did not know my expressions, I learned what my smile looked like, and my serious or worried look, and I stared at them thinking: "That's me".

Even now, I like looking in the mirror. Over the years, I have followed the progress of the wrinkles that furrow my brow, my cheeks have grown thinner and my lips have become pale: but it is me, and I feel a sort of fondness for the reflection in the mirror. I must have been fourteen or fifteen when we got out, and Laura had died twenty-three years later. I had walked for two years before arriving here, in this place which I call my home: so then I was just over forty. That was twenty-two years ago, I suppose I am an old woman, I still love looking at this face. I do not know if it is beautiful or ugly, but it is the only human face I ever see. I smile at it amicably, and that way I receive a smile back.

I opened the cupboards in the bathroom and found a pile of towels. They did not contain anything else. I presumed they were awaiting the baggage of the occupant who had never arrived. There was nothing put there in advance: it was a pity, it would have told me something about him.

Then I went back into the kitchen, made some white coffee and put some egg powder in water to make an

omelette according to the instructions on the packet. Then, I pulled back the bed covers and slept, for the first time in my life, with my head on a pillow. I liked it very much.

The next day, I began my inventory of the corridor. It contained various sorts of tools and a number of objects whose use I never did fathom. I suppose they are electrical gadgets, perhaps assembled, perhaps in parts. The women had talked of radios, televisions, telephones, motorcycles and cars, and the books on astronautics made me wonder whether it was laboratory equipment that had not found its destined use. There were no written instructions except for the defrosting oven in the kitchen, thanks to which I was able to learn to use it. I prowled around the equipment in the corridor for ages, I picked it up and put it back, for I knew full well that my determination would not make up for the information I lacked. I still go and look at it sometimes. After all, I did not really know how to read when I found the gardening handbook, and yet I managed to decipher it. I can count well, I can add and subtract easily, but I still find multiplication and division difficult. According to Anthea, that is because I did not learn my multiplication tables until I was quite old, and you need to learn them when you are very young for them to be engraved on your mind. Other than that, I know nothing, and the objects in the corridor come from a sophisticated technological civilisation of which I have not the least idea. The women had taught me what they knew, which was little, they had forgotten a lot and besides, they lacked the implements to show me things. So, I know that people used to knit, and we could have made knitting needles by smoothing very straight twigs, but we did not have any

wool. I sew when I find thread, which is not often. There was none in the house. With time, I completely wore out my trousers and shirts, but I found a nice piece of fabric in a bunker and I am wearing tunics again.

The most precious thing I found in the bunker is paper. There were several reams, and a box of pencils. That was how I was at last able to learn to write. The books helped me, even the ones on astronautics: true, I did not understand the mathematics, but they contained many lengthy chapters of explanations in which I studied the ways of saying things, the spelling and the grammar. I spent a lot of time studying the incomprehensible diagrams which went with the text, I copied them and that taught me to draw accurately, keeping the proportions right, so that I was able to map my excursions.

I decided that this bunker would be my home base. I asked myself hundreds of questions about its purpose. It was not marked by a cabin, but by a mound of stones that could easily be overlooked, and I wondered whether they were meant to conceal it or mark it. It contains more provisions than I had ever seen in the prisons, you could live there for ever. It seems to me that it is a luxurious place, but it is obvious that I do not have a clear idea of luxury. In the ceiling, there are the same air-conditioning grates as in the other bunkers and, when I keep absolutely quiet, I can hear the same soft hum that indicates that everything is working. The bed is very big, several people could sleep in it, and there is room for six people to sit around the table. In the kitchen there are four dozen glasses and several types of plate. Does one person need all that? I am really sorry that there are no clothes, for not only would it have been useful to find some, but I could

also have learned a lot from them. The books only taught me to write. Was this the home of a leader or an outlaw's hideout? I am certainly too ignorant to interpret things that would probably have been blindingly obvious to the women with whom I had lived, for they at least had seen the world.

Then I gave up asking pointless questions. I examined everything, but I know no more about the absent owner of my home than I had done on my arrival. I no longer think about him. Whatever his plans had been, he failed and his domain was now mine. Neither he nor I can do anything about it.

After two months, I set off exploring again. I made more than fifty expeditions, either walking in straight lines or in concentric semi-circles. I found nothing but locked prisons. Perhaps there were other places like the one where I had made my home, I did not see them, even though I never forgot to examine the ground, patiently looking for another mound of stones. I have not understood anything about the world in which I live. I have criss-crossed it in every direction, I have not found its boundaries.

On my last trip, I was standing on top of a hill, before me stretched a long walk down and a new plain, I could see a cabin in the distance, and suddenly, I was overcome with despondency. I told myself: another staircase, the guards' room, the cage and forty emaciated corpses. I sat down and the realisation dawned on me that I had had enough. For the twenty or so years that I had been alone, hope had buoyed me up, and suddenly, it had deserted me. I had imagined, a thousand times, a bunker where the cage would be open, where the prisoners, intoxicated with joy could have escaped. They would have found the sky,

the plain, they would have trembled, dreamed of towns, of rescuers, but would, like us, have discovered this same hollow freedom. It was as if I could see them before me, looking at me and demanding an explanation: is this what you have to offer us? Leave us alone, we're better off dead than desperate. I hung my head and set off home.

Yet, I set about writing this account: apparently, even if I no longer have the strength or the heart to go off exploring again, my hope, which waned briefly, has not really expired. The bunker I did not go into might have been the one, or the next one, or another one to the west that time I went east? Who knows whether, one day, a very old man or a very old woman might arrive here, see the raised cover, be astonished, hope, and start descending the spiral staircase? That person will find these sheets of paper piled on the big wooden table and read them, and someone will at last receive a message from someone. Perhaps, at this very moment as I end my days exhausted, a human being is walking across the plain as I did, going from bunker to bunker, a rucksack on their back, determinedly seeking an answer to the thousands of questions consuming them. I know that I cannot wait much longer, that I will soon have to deal myself the death blow that my companions so often requested, for the pain is becoming increasingly relentless.

From time to time, at night, I go upstairs and sit outside. I listen. Recently, I resolved to try and shout at the top of my voice: "Hello! Is anybody there?" My voice was croaky and weak, but I still listened. I heard only the soft rustle of the grass in the breeze. Another time, I collected lots of branches and made a fire that could be seen from a long way off. I kept it going all night, although my common sense told me that there was nobody. But it

also told me that there are so many bunkers, that probably, most probably, there was another one where the siren had gone off when the door was open, and why should they all be dead? The night goes by, I think of my life, the girl in a rage who taunted the young guard, angry at the present – as if I had a future – or easily climbing the hundred stairs, caught in the web of illusions in the middle of the boundless desolate plain, under a sky that is nearly always grey, or such a pale blue that it seems to be dying – but a sky does not die, it is I who am dying, who was already dying in the bunker – and I tell myself that I am alone in this land that no longer has any jailers, or prisoners, unaware of what I came here to do, the mistress of silence, owner of bunkers and corpses, I tell myself that I have walked for thousands of hours and that soon I will take my last ten steps to go and put these sheets of paper on the table and come back to lie down on my death bed, an emaciated old woman whose eyes, which no hand will close, will always be looking towards the door. I have spent my whole life doing I don't know what, which has not made me happy, I have a few drops of blood left, that is the only libation I can offer destiny, which has chosen me. Then I see the pale winter dawn break and I go back down to sleep, if the pain allows me any respite, on the big bed where there is room for several people.

There is always light. Sometimes I hope that one night it will go out, that something will happen. The women were always wondering where it came from. I never really understood their explanations of power stations, pylons, conductor wires, and I have never seen anything corresponding to their hazy descriptions: I have seen only the plain, the cabins, and the shelter where I am ending my

days. I have long since stopped trying to imagine things which I do not know. I have spent a lot of time examining the objects on the shelves in the corridor, but I have learned nothing. They are perhaps weapons, or means of communication that would have enabled me to contact humanity. Too bad. I gave up reading and rereading the books and treatises on astronautics. So few things happened during all those years of walking. I found the bus, I lost the road, I arrived here. In any case, I had to die some day: even if I had led a normal life, like the women before, I would still have found myself at the dawn of my last day. Sometimes the women pitied me, saying that at least they had known real life, and I was very jealous of them, but they died, as I am about to die, and what does having lived mean when you are no longer alive? If I had not fallen ill, I think I would have set off again all the same, and would still be walking, for I have never had anything else to do.

I know, even when I pretend the contrary, that I am the only living person on this planet which has almost no seasons. Only I can say that time exists, but it has passed me by without my feeling it. I saw the other women grow old. I go over to the mirror and look at myself: I suppose I did not use to have those lines across my cheeks and around my eyes, but I do not remember my face before the wrinkles. The women had explained to me what photos were, but I do not have any. All that I know about time is that the days follow on from each other, I feel tired and I sleep, I feel hungry and I eat. Of course, I count. Every thirty days, I say to myself that a month has gone by: these are words, they do not really give me time. Perhaps you never have time when you are alone? You only acquire it by watching it go by in others, and since all the women

have died, it only affects the scrawny plants growing among the stones and producing, occasionally, just enough flowers to make a single seed which will fall a little way off, not far because the wind is never strong, and where it may or may not germinate. The alternation of day and night is merely a physical phenomenon, time is a question of being human and, honestly!, how could I consider myself a human being, I who have only known thirty-nine people and all of them women? I think that time must have something to do with the duration of pregnancies, the growth of children, all those things that I have not experienced. If someone spoke to me, there would be time, the beginning and end of what they said to me, the moment when I answered, their response. The briefest conversation creates time. Perhaps I have tried to create time through writing these pages: I begin, I fill them with words, I pile them up, and I still do not exist because nobody is reading them. I am writing them for some unknown reader who will probably never come – I am not even sure that humanity has survived that mysterious event which governed my life. But if that person comes, they will read them and I will have a time in their mind. They will have my thoughts in them: the reader and I thus mingled will constitute something living, that will not be me, because I will be dead, and will not be that person as they were before reading, because my story, added to their mind, will then become part of their thinking. I will only be truly dead if nobody ever comes, if the centuries, then the millennia go by for so long that this planet, which I no longer believe is Earth, no longer exists. As long as the sheets of paper covered in my handwriting lie on this table, I can become a reality in someone's mind. Then everything will

be obliterated, the suns will burn out and I will disappear like the universe.

Most likely nobody will come. I shall leave the door open and my story on the table, where it will gradually gather dust. One day, the natural cataclysms that destroy planets will wipe out the plain, the shelter will collapse on top of the little pile of neatly arranged pages, they will be scattered among the debris, never read.

I found out I was ill three months ago. I was in the toilet, passing a motion, when I experienced a new sensation: something warm was trickling down my vagina, that part of my body which had always been so silent that I never thought about its existence. I leaned over the bowl and I saw a big black clot, with yellowish filaments. Before I had a chance to panic, I lost a stream of blood, and the pain was so acute that I passed out. When I came to, I was lying on the floor, and it no longer hurt. I got up without too much difficulty, I felt a little giddy, perhaps because of the haemorrhage, but it quickly wore off. I washed, I cleaned the bloodstained floor, and, remembering what Anthea had taught me, I grilled a piece of red meat to make up for the loss.

The women had talked of the menopause, but I do not suppose that it affected me, because I had never reached puberty. However there is no reason to suppose that I do not have a uterus, or ovaries, even if they have not developed normally. I was puzzled, then I told myself that there was no point worrying and tried to forget the incident. I am not adept at this kind of mental activity, and even if I had been, it would not have served me for long: the same thing happened the following day. My symptoms were similar to those of Mary-Jane, who according to

Anthea had a cancer of the sexual organs and went and hanged herself from the bars when she could no longer stand the pain. There was no other alternative and I would not receive any different treatment. Anthea had told me that they performed operations, gave morphine. Perhaps there are medicines in the corridor, but I am not able to recognise them, and I have never found anything that looks like those bottles from which the guards sometimes took white pills when someone had a temperature.

The pain has been excruciating from the beginning, and it is becoming too frequent. I am suffering more than half the time, it takes away all pleasure from life and I am unable to enjoy the moments of respite because I am so weak. I can no longer climb the stairs in one go and, when I get to the top, I am cold. After a quarter of an hour's walk, I have to rest. Probably the fact that I no longer eat much does not help, but if I force myself, I feel nauseous. I am nearing my end.

I am all alone. Even though I sometimes dream of a visitor, I have walked backwards and forwards over the plain for too long to believe in it. Nobody will come because there are only corpses. How could the father of Prince Hamlet, if he was dead, appear and talk to him? The dead cannot move, they decompose on the spot and in the end are reduced to bones which will crumble at the slightest touch. I have seen hundreds, and none of them has ever come and talked to me in the middle of the night. And I would have been so happy if they had! Anthea had tried to explain to me what the Christians meant by God, and the soul. Apparently, people believed firmly in it, it is even mentioned in the preface to one of the books on astronautics. Sometimes, I used to sit under the sky, on a

clear night, and gaze at the stars saying, in my croaky voice: "Sir, if you are up there somewhere, and you are not too busy, come and say a few words to me, for I am very lonely and it would make me so happy." Nothing happened. So I think that this humanity, which I wonder whether I am a part of, really had a vivid imagination!

I cannot be very old, if I left the bunker at around fifteen, I am not much over sixty. The women said that, in the other world, life expectancy was more than seventy. But it required medical care. There, I would have had periods, children, and my useless womb would not have rotted. I often have haemorrhages, it is disintegrating, I know better than to hope that one day it will be reduced to nothing and I will regain my health. For some time I have been coughing and I have chest pains: Anthea had told me about metastasis. In any case, it would soon be time to take a hand, but I shall not wait, I will do it in a little while, for I have almost finished my story and after the last full stop, there will be nothing to keep me back.

As soon as I realised I was ill, I thought about ways of killing myself. I do not want to hang myself and dangle mummified on the end of a rope for ever. I want to be lying with dignity, like the man sitting between the folded mattresses; I want to be looking straight ahead of me, but if the pain is too great, I risk something unpleasant. I do not have either enough time or strength left to go to the bus and retrieve one of the guns that I placed on the tombs, so I sharpened a knife for a long time: if I brush my finger against it, I cut myself. The blade is thin, flat and sturdy. I know where to plunge it so that it goes in straight between two ribs, pierces the heart and stops it. When

the pain leaves me in peace, it is hard for me to believe that I will do it, when it rampages, my doubts vanish.

I will sit on the bed, and arrange the cushions and blankets rolled up around me so that my body is firmly supported. Everything will be perfectly clean and tidy. I hope there will be no blood, which I know is possible. Perhaps nobody will ever come, perhaps one day, an astonished human being, arriving at the foot of the stairs as I did so long ago, will see the dark wood-panelled room, the neatly arranged bed, and an old woman sitting upright, a knife in her heart, looking peaceful.

It is strange that I am dying from a diseased womb, I who have never had periods and who have never known men.

END

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